

**An
Inextricable
Tale**

by Paul Allgood

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This is dedicated to the month of May

Session 1

“Here”

To take a cue from “good old Holden Caulfield,” I really don’t feel like going into all the lousy details of my life either, if you want to know the truth, and I mean no offense, but frankly I don’t think it’s yours or anyone else’s fucking business. You see, the only reason I’m spouting off to you is because if you don’t understand me or where I’m coming from, then there’s a good chance that I’ll never get well, and, on top of that, I’ll never get to see my daughter again. So I suppose your job is feigning concern over all of this and analyzing the reasons as to how or why I ever even ended up HERE in the first place. As I said before, I mean no offense toward you, but I consider myself a private person mostly, and I do not want you knowing certain things about me, like why I dream of this or that. I fail to see how analyzing my dreaming about fish or whatever is going to help me find my

daughter. It's just not that important, really, and not even worth bringing up except to say that I don't want you or anybody else poking around inside my head looking for answers where there aren't any.

I think most people play dumb and pretend they have no idea how their personal set of circumstances came about. Strictly speaking for myself, however, I feel like I know just exactly where I went wrong and how I ended up HERE instead of there or someplace else. Then again, I may not be as smart as all of that, otherwise I would not be HERE in the first place. There is a million-mile gap between that which you *think* you know and that which you actually do know. If in fact the entire human race is even half as brilliant as they claim to be, then why are we still living HERE, occupying this shithole of a planet anyway? I guess I fail to see the point of it all. I know I can be a pill at times too, and frankly, a real pain in the ass to listen to because once I get going I forget all the rules and etiquette that apply to rambling, venting and or simply dumping myself all over the goddamned place.

Do you remember the scene in the movie *Breakfast Club* when that chick suddenly dumped her purse and all of her shit just spilled out everywhere? She did not say a damned thing for the whole movie, but they just kept on pressing her until she finally did. Well, yeah, I guess I am a lot like that. I have a mouth that I try keeping shut, but if you insist on *opening* yours and asking me something, all bets are off. I am only HERE because I have to be. I was never asked if I *wanted* to be. There's a difference. So what's *your* favourite colour? What kind of movies do *you* watch? Do *you* prefer coffee or tea? How does it make *you* feel when I ask a whole bunch of bullshit personal ques-

tions? Say more about that? Oh, I'm doing it again, aren't I? Well, pardon the hell out of me, but that's just another example of the perpetual diarrhea that flies out of my mouth, I guess. My brain works pretty much the same way, scattered, random and constantly moving from one pathetic rambling topic to the next. Sometimes when I get upset, I even hear weird voices telling me to do things like cut on my own flesh. I figured I should tell you that because I can see you staring at my wrists. So why not just put down that stupid pad and pen of yours right now and take a fucking picture, for Chrissakes? It would certainly last longer. The bleeding happens to soothe me if you must know, and no, they don't know about it over there because I wear long sleeves most of the time, even in hot-assed weather. Maybe you should write that down, "cutter."

When you just sit there staring at me like that, I feel like a worthless piece of shit. You wouldn't look at me like that if I weren't HERE, though. In fact, anywhere else but HERE and I could be just about as debonair, charming, and beautiful as anyone else I know. Right now though, I feel like a giant bug under a magnifying glass, a fat, dark, and ugly one at that. But I guess you didn't really ask me how I felt, now did you? Outside of doing your job, do you even give a damn how I feel? Evidently you don't because you just keep nodding your head, scribbling things down, being careful not to let your face show that you really think I'm some sort of prattling idiot. I really don't know if you're even listening to me at all, to tell you the truth. You haven't said a damn word back to me so far. So what's the difference between this and prostitution? Because either way, when my time is up, it's up, right? In either case, the going rate is by the hour, except in HERE it's all one big mind-

fuck. I know this to be true because just as soon as I start telling you the first goddamned thing about my life you'll stand up, pretending to be polite, but you'll actually be saying "TIME'S UP, NOW GET THE HELL OUT!" I'm sure that'll do wonders for my self-esteem. Expediency is the key to my recovery, right? I guess short-term reparative therapy will magically cure everything that's supposedly wrong with me. Please don't misunderstand; I just have disdain for the entire process. Now I'm a bit pissed off. I feel like I've talked so goddamned long about *talking* that I have almost forgotten what I was going to say. See, I told you I just go from one thing to another. Nowadays, when I speak, I don't make a whole lot of sense, but I wasn't always like this. I think that today you just caught me on a bad day. Please believe me when I tell you I only *used* to be a liar, honestly. I wasn't always like this, I swear, and in my defense, things have been a little rougher than usual. For me it was always easiest to just blame the world and everybody else in it for the lousy turn of events in my life, because then I never had to be responsible for any of it. But even someone in my condition knows there are very few real victims in life. There is, however, a world full of volunteers for victimhood. That's the kind of bullshit psychobabble that you people salivate over, I know. There is also a lot to be said for knowing far too little after it's already much too late. Because back when most of this stuff was happening, I volunteered for practically everything. That's why I am HERE in the first place. I really didn't even want to get into all of this as I was saying before, but if it keeps you from staring at me like that, I'll tell you on one condition. You must always remember that you're the one who insisted on knowing, more so than I ever insisted

on telling.

A few years back I was attending Polytechnic in South England studying jazz and pop music, trying to get gigs and land record deals, just as a million other hopefuls aspired to do. I was in the majority of those who got neither the gig nor the deal, so I dropped out, said goodbye to a few people (some of whom were quite special) and got my black ass on a plane back to the good old US of A. Mom and Dad were right there at the airport with open arms waiting to say “I told you so” and that I should have finished off my degree in Journalism and not been wasting my time on something as “foolishly unrealistic” as being a pop star. But how in the hell do you tell a guy with a Master’s degree and a mother who writes for a living that they are wrong? The short answer is, you don’t. Because by all accounts, even according to the white people around them, my Father, Joel, and my Mother, Olivia, had done quite well for themselves. It’s really not any of your goddamned business about my family, but you headshrinker types always enjoy hearing about other people’s upbringing. By listening to me babble on about my family, that’s supposedly how you figure out where all your crazy people went wrong and flew over the cuckoo’s nest, right? Anyway, my Dad grew up in the North, where all the liberals seemed to be in love with the idea of integration, that is, blacks and whites going to the same school, yet it was those same liberals who secretly *despised* my father as an individual when he wasn’t around. He went to Vietnam. He saw many people get their limbs blown off, and I’m sure much worse, which he never told me about. Why he didn’t just go to Canada is still beyond me, because when he got back from serving this country, he was spat upon, denied service

at certain bars. You look smart enough to be able to figure out why they wouldn't serve him, but in case you don't, it was because they didn't serve blacks or "Negroes" as they liked to call us back then. Can you imagine that? Of all the goddamned nerve. I probably would've been shot dead by somebody back then because I couldn't begin to fathom taking that kind of bullshit from anyone. Anyway, he didn't bitch about it, he just made his life better. He went on to get a college education, busted his ass selling insurance while climbing the corporate ladder and then he retired. Now he runs his own consulting firm. Somewhere in between he married my mother and raised three boys. Two of them earned degrees with me, of course, being the wayward one, and eternally grateful that my younger brothers Lance, and Neil, never followed my example. We may be running out of time here, but I know you're going to ask me about my mother also, right? Not because you truly give a rat's ass but more likely because you're just nosy as hell and want to ask whether or not I was breast fed, or worse yet, if I ever wanted to have sex with my own mother or something, right? Now don't get me wrong here, because there are definitely some mothers I'd love to have my way with, like Judith Light or Patricia Heaton, for instance. But as for my own, never in a million years, thank you very much. Just what kind of a sick bastard do you think I am? Now I'm really starting to get annoyed, but I'll just tell you that my mother grew up in the South where Strom Thurmond conservative types hated the idea of integration but would always pick out that one fine piece of "brown sugar" to play house with behind closed doors. My mother married my dad, became a writer, and like I said earlier, had my two brothers and me. We always had food on the

table and clothes on our backs. There was no Santa Claus in the Shields' household because my dad worked too hard all year round to have some white man sweep down a chimney and take all the credit. He never said it in those exact words, but I knew he felt that way as we were growing up, because he made sure that no sacrifice he ever made for us went unnoticed. I don't blame him for that. The irony of it all was that my mother went to great pains to have a huge oil painting of a white Jesus hanging over the fireplace. Go figure. So now you know more than you did before I came in here about my family and me. All of the bullshit about my family background still doesn't really tell you a goddamned thing about me, or how I got to be like this, though.

I was still chasing my underground pop star fantasy when I met Jasmine. From head to toe, she was remarkable. If I had ever decided to do a cover version of any pop song in the world to describe her, it would have been Donna Lewis's "I Love You, Always Forever" because of the one really cool line that talks about "the most beautiful blue eyes"...such was the case with Jasmine. But come to think of it, even though most of her life was a lot less lousy than mine, nothing concerning her is really any of your business, either. To be honest, what right do I even have to even bring her into all this? But I guess since I was the one who brought her up in the first place, let me just tell you that she came from a good family in Albemarle, and besides having the most beautiful blue eyes I'd ever seen, she also had a good head on her shoulders and aspirations for a nursing degree at the local college. I knew she had a good head on her shoulders because Jazz was the one who explained to me how that scene in *Pulp Fiction*, with John

Travolta sitting on the toilet, was shot out of order. Past understanding Quentin Tarantino films, there really wasn't much more to know. When we first met, however, I probably seemed like I was really going places. First of all, I at least knew that I wanted the hell out of Albemarle. My dreams were a lot bigger than that shithole of a town could have ever hoped to contain. You had to live there to know that anybody who wanted to do something other than the routine, dead-ender job was seen as some kind of fucking weirdo, as if dreaming about life outside the confines of Albemarle was blasphemy. You don't think I'm a weirdo just because I wanted something different, do you? I mean, you could call me a weirdo for a whole shitload of other reasons, but I hope wanting something different doesn't make me certifiable. Anyway, Jazz and I soon decided it was time to shack up together with me doing part-time at the restaurant, while continuing to record, and Jasmine still going for her nursing degree at college. Neither set of parents were exactly what I'd call ecstatic about our choice of living arrangements, and this especially seemed to be the case on Jasmine's side of the family. I would imagine, though, that if you're Mr. and Mrs. Larry and Linda York you'd expect your daughter to do a little better than a Polytechnic drop out, pop star-wannabe-waiter with nappy dreadlocks, a dark complexion and a weight problem. I mean an *overweight* problem, definitely not a problem in the other direction. Dare I ask however, what other average white family that lived on the coast wouldn't want better for their daughter? I think the Yorks took an instant dislike toward me. Albemarle wasn't exactly enamored with "We Two" either. Even if we "let them burn their eyes" just like Argent said to do once in a song, the whole town's attitude

just reeked with that insidious undercurrent of narrowed eyes, disjointed noses and crooked, contorted mouths. I'd personally just as soon see the mayor himself hold a town hall meeting that openly castigated and branded us with scarlet letters as race traitors, as opposed to being party to those painfully constipated expressions and seemingly imperceptible, yet nonetheless, very real slights that would occur. You could see it in the landlord's eyes whenever our rent was due. When we paid late this only served to exacerbate matters. The town's arteries seemed to be clogged by fear and ignorance, yet you couldn't exactly cast a Klansmen's white sheet over everything because the truth was, Jasmine and I were able to secure housing; I was employed. No window of ours was ever smashed, nor were there any "burnt offerings" decorating our lawn. In short, the two of us were simply seen as a couple who merely chose to break a social code. Everyday life itself was simply too fleeting and ephemeral for us to inspect all of the supposed collateral damage falling out from the consequences of our actions. Jasmine and I had our own issues to deal with.

Hey, I know it's time for us to wrap up here, and this might be a little off the subject, but next time can I sit in *your* chair? You never even gave me the option of where to sit. You just told me where to sit. Shouldn't I at least get a choice? Or is your chair somehow special? If it is, I mean no offense, and I'll know better next time.

Session 2

“Kira”

Just in case you did not know, it is a biological fact that when two people fool around long enough, especially a guy and a girl, one of them is bound to get pregnant. It doesn't matter if you use protection or not. I only say that because I know what you're thinking, but believe me, we used protection almost all the time. You really don't have to tell me that it only takes once, though, and when Jazz and I discovered this the hard way, that's sort of when my mental wheels began unraveling. I mean, that's when I started feeling weird and hearing all those voices, the ones I was telling you about last time. We weren't exactly rolling in dough to begin with. What's more, for damned certain, I couldn't see how I was going to be able to support us, let alone record while Jazz was carrying our baby and attending school full time. That still didn't stop us from doing the honorable thing in getting

hitched since neither of us wanted a bastard, and it really didn't matter that it was shotgun. We were in love and making the best of things one day at a time. And save for a night or two, when I would go cavorting after my shifts were over, I thought I had managed to convince myself that we were doing okay, and that we were going to make it through just fine. Except with me, somewhere deep inside, things were not "fine." You can't say "Everything is okay" when it isn't. Well, I guess you can say any goddamned thing you want, but why waste a lie on yourself when deep down you know the truth anyway?

All of this shit was happening way too fast for me and I was having a hard time coping with it all. I would go to work each day showing off my new wedding band but purposely omitting the fact that Jazz and I were expecting. Why I was constantly trying to cover this up worried the hell out of me, but for some reason or another, I just felt compelled to do so. Every time I showed someone the band around my finger the first question seemed to be "Did you knock her up?" I always thought that question was entirely rude and unnecessary, so my stock reply would always be "No," even though I knew the real answer. This is when the liar part of me began to emerge. Don't get me wrong here, I loved the idea of our baby, and I was excited. I just felt the timing was all wrong, and I was deeply confused about our future together. I was now seeing my co-workers more than I saw Jazz on a daily basis, and it was much easier for me to drown my confusion in booze at the other wait-staff zombies' house parties than to come home tired, stinking of food, and loathing my daily routine. I loved both Jazz and our soon to be newborn, but the timing was all wrong. You see, I was meant to become a huge un-

derground popstar selling millions of records *before* any of this stuff ever happened. At least that's the kind of life I hoped for when I closed my eyes at night. You needn't tell me about rude awakenings because just waking up every day drenched in my own sweat-stained uniform from the night before told me everything I needed to know about me and life in general. It's pretty goddamned rude and intrusive; life is.

I am also here to let you know that time doesn't stand still unless you're dead, and the birth of our daughter, Kira Gabrielle Shields was living proof of that. You see, in my own mind, I desperately wanted to turn back the clock or at least delay it long enough to get my feelings sorted out, but it was too late. A new life had arrived. My eyes literally flooded with saltwater as Kira expelled her first cry. She was announcing to the world that yes, indeed, she had crossed the great abyss from the warm, nurturing confines of Jazz's womb over to the cold and uncertain, yet all too inviting, world outside. Deep down, I always wondered what my child would look like with any woman. Now the day arrived where I was beholden to a beautiful eight-pound bundle of bliss. She had a full head of hair that was a hybrid of Jazz and me, tiny wrinkles under her eyes (a family feature passed on as far back as my grandmother) and glowing amber brown biracial looking skin. I loved the smell of my newborn baby's skin. My tongue could taste the tears flowing down my cheeks blending with hot August perspiration. I was feeling joy and exhilaration on one end of the spectrum, yet confusion and fear on the other. It was all I could do to kiss Jazz on her forehead and tell her I loved her for the beautiful gift she had given us, yet I felt a disturbing gap between myself

and reality that moment by moment was becoming more like a chasm. One would think that a father would be so proud that he would go running around the hospital randomly shoving those pink, smelly bubblegum cigars in people's mouths blabbing the news of his newborn to anyone within earshot. But no, not this father. This father was much too cowardly, frightened and terrified on the inside to claim such joy. Unbridled joy was the last thing in world I would let myself feel even while I was holding my own newborn baby. I simply wouldn't allow it, not for a split second. What about my music? What will the people at work think? How the hell will I be able to afford all of this? Will I even be a good father? There is nothing more toxic than thought, plagued by doubt, fear, pessimism and worry. I had all of these. My mind was reeling. I couldn't let Jazz know this. Worse still, reality was now a stranger to me. I couldn't even tell my boss why I was out that day. Instead, I insisted Jazz call my work from her hospital bed and tell him I was the one in the hospital instead. As you might imagine, no Husband or Father of the Year Awards were forthcoming for that little episode of mine. Is the time really up, or are you just saying that because you're tired of hearing about this? Okay, then, are we picking up next week? I guess I can't blame you; I would be burned out on hearing this type of neurotic bullshit too. I'll see you next week.

Session 3

“Life as a Genuine Fake”

Ilie like a goddamned rug. I was just thinking about what we talked about last week, and you know, come to think of it, every chance I got I used to keep such a tight lid on my so-called “private life” that sometimes I felt that I was not even privy to it. Anthony Keidis was right about how lonely it is when you “don’t even know yourself.” At home every time I saw Kira, my heart overflowed with joy. At work every time I saw a chance to lie about having a child, I took it. My heart sank with guilt. I cloaked this cowardice in a veil of “It’s no one’s business about my life.” How much more selfish could I have possibly been? I wasn’t living on an island, for Chrissakes, and Kira’s blessed arrival on this planet had touched so many people’s lives. The Yorks had even begun to soften. Jazz’s former workmates as well as a few sisters from her sorority were elated to share her good fortune.

But where the hell was I? My physical body was there going to work each day, yet my mind was elsewhere in a state of tormented denial.

That's when I discovered that hell outside of the body was non-existent. The only place where a true hell resided was within my own mind. There were no flames charring my skin, just a searing guilt burning through my brain. There was no physical place in the universe where I would be punished *for* my lies and deceit, yet it was blindingly obvious that I was being punished *by* those very same lies and deceptions. Nevertheless, I was hell bent on keeping up the facade of a twenty-something year old guy who was married, with no children, who waited tables and wrote songs at night after he got back home. That makes good copy in rags like *Rolling Stone*, right? God, I'm so fucking pathetic at times. I really am. Who the hell was I kidding? My life at this point was nothing like this, but I refused to face the truth about it. The next best thing I knew to do was try my hand at living as a genuine fake.

To make sure Jazz didn't think I was a total loser, I picked and chose what nights I stayed out drinking and now, drugging after my shifts were over. I would always come home to them, but I also made sure there were the odd nights after work that I would make it known I was available for a few hours of fun and food, meeting up with the others for all things eating-related at the local 24 hour dive. Many people who are overweight will try to selectively block out their piggish habits and feign surprise later when their scales collapse. But not me. I was a sure fire inductee into the fat-assed hall of fame. What killed me is that I would go around claiming vegetarian status as if that made a difference when I was drinking like a fish, smoking

ganja, and then loading up on milkshakes, cookies, twinkies, chips, dips and practically anything else I could get my hands on. Yeah, my eating habits were really healthy except for all the junk food I ate...but I was vegetarian at least. These kinds of contradictions were a hallmark with me. Jazz used to always tease me and ask why I was so concerned with the ozone layer when I smoked cigarettes. And you know what? The more I think about it, the more she was right to ask that question.

- You have to be sure the mirror doesn’t break –
- When you live your life as a genuine fake. –

I guess I don’t blame you for throwing me out, especially when I start rhyming words. I know you didn’t sign on for that, and certainly Alan Watts wouldn’t appreciate it much either. My ride’s here anyway, and I will just show myself out. Don’t bother getting up because all it does is remind me of just how short on time we always seem to run.

Session 4

“It Takes a Thief”

Even the most despicable characters in the world have bills to pay. Being a genuine fake made me no exception to the rule. The reality of the situation is that I did love Jazz and Kira very much. You've got to believe me. Even though I was now deliberately walking around denying the parts of my life that I did not like and editing out others as if I had a liar's license, at times there were glimmers of pride, dignity and ambition that would manage to pierce the drugged haze living around me.

I was a decent waiter to start with, and it wasn't as if I would let Kira go around the house pissing and soiling herself. We took a bit of public assistance, too, a euphemism for food stamps and such, but I was still a working father. Even if the night before I had been out powdering my nose, as it were, I knew if my shift was to be at 11:00,

most times with dead certainty that is where I would be. It is amazing how quickly you can shake off the ghosts when you need to. And except for those rare mornings when I would show up and wait tables with shaving cream residue still on my cheek, the system worked out okay and nobody knew the difference.

But despite my perfect system, I had to face the fact that Jazz and I were broke as a joke. I kept feeding myself the same line of bullshit that someday my brand of electro disco synth pop would rise up and take over the underground music scene. I had to face the fact that I was no Marc Almond, though. In other words, the whole idea of a career in pop music seemed only like a distant pipe dream now. We were struggling and suffering. I was feeding off the restaurant and getting fatter by the hour, yet you could come visit my home and find the cupboard and refrigerator practically empty except for the odd baby item here and there. It wasn't like I was starving them or anything, but what the hell kind of provider was I supposed to be anyway? Can you imagine a grown-assed man, not having enough food in the house for his family, a grown man still going around the restaurant tickling the sides and ribcages of the female servers? Making and saving money and planning for my family's future should have been my focus. I mean, it was okay to have fun at your workplace, but I was making it a social event. It was now more of a place I would go to in hopes of escaping the realities of my home life rather than the other way around. The restaurant was my substitute for going out. The lines had blurred and my behavior showed it. And just like in the middle of the night when you have to take a piss, you ignore your bladder for a while, but eventually, you have to go or soak in

urine. Berating myself for my lewd behavior still didn't change the fact that my family needed immediate relief. I just knew that if I didn't do something soon, we would all be *drowning*, not just soaking, in a huge yellow sea of urine.

Once you work at a place for a while, you begin to understand its little idiosyncrasies, its system, its inner workings. I don't care where you work, there's bound to be a security leak somewhere. This place was no different than the rest. It was only a matter of time before I got the bright idea for a new business venture at the restaurant. Maybe I was losing, no I was *definitely* was out of my mind to try this, but I needed money and smelled opportunity. My tips would *double* if I could pull this off. For this venture no upfront capital was required, I didn't need to build a downline, and I could set my own hours. It was the wonderful business of embezzlement. High risk, yes, but high yield, and I liked my odds. I thought it was a real gem of an idea that had nothing but upside, really. The way it worked was simple. Since I had been a trusted employee for a good while there, the management staff, oblivious to my darker nature, was proud to bestow upon me the token title of "trainer," which if you know anything about the restaurant business gets you next to nothing in the way of a wage increase. Still, it had its benefits. For one, my wait section was always a bit better than the newer employees, and most importantly, I now had access, albeit limited, to the manager's functions. This enabled me to go "high-tech" and make unauthorized voids on guest checks and simply pocket the difference. What an absolute goldmine of a business! I could not have asked for a better gig than this! You see, the trick was to take in only a few extra dol-

lars each day. Just enough so Jazz and I could afford a bit more towards bills. This combined with my chickenshit of a paycheck had all my family's needs secure. It was the most brilliant scheme I had ever hatched to date. Smith and Barney, Prudential, Tyco, Enron, and hell, even fucking Martha Stewart needed to watch their backs because Saul Shields was in fact the newest, hottest and savviest "financier" on the block. Embezzlement. A wonderful non-violent white-collar crime. Embezzlement; "IT'S NOT JUST FOR RICH WHITE GUYS ANYMORE!"

What do you think? Was that a cool slogan or what? Any other suggestions? I had the keys to my financial future in the palms of hot-assed hands, and from this moment on, Jazz and Kira were going to have the best money could buy...I just wish I could buy more time from you. If I could, how much would it cost? You never say anything. I guess I will see you next time.

Session 5

“6X9”

(Good Old Albemarle)

Incarcerations always seem funny and somewhat ironical unless they happen to you. I know I personally would've laughed my ebony ass off at anyone else in the world going to jail, except this time it was me. And even so, I still had to give the situation I put myself in points for irony's sake. It was some nonexistent god's idea of a joke, but if the truth were told, there was no laugh track because nothing is funny at all about sitting in jail for stealing from your job. Still, I had to give Albemarle County all the credit in the world. Hats off for their wonderfully constructed rusted out iron bars, *double* praises for the sublime bouquet of urine all along the side of the four semen-stained walls, and TRIPLE kudos for the fine job Albemarle County had done in ensuring that not just one, but two people were assigned to a holding cell. The only thing I could bring myself to do was think of ways to oc-

cupy my mind, and thank heavens, they at least let me have a journal to keep me from going stir crazy in the stir. You just knew that somehow I was going to end up there. After all, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out that unless you were like that band of thieves who stole that painting in Oslo, you were going to be caught. Still, I heard that many musicians, Rick James for an example, used their time in the slam constructively, penning tunes for example. Hell, Rick James wrote *assloads* of songs in the hoosegow. But no, not me, I just sat there staring at the blank pages while my eyes burned with tears, which, consequently, blurred my vision, turning my book into tiny fragmented pieces obscured by those same tears. It looked like a bunch of watery pixels all distorted and out of focus. I remember pressing the pen against my lips hoping to find inspiration, but no words came to me.

I don't think you realize how hard it is to call your wife and explain that you're in jail because you were caught stealing from your job. It's pretty fucking hard, in case you hadn't guessed. You try telling your wife you won't be home to kiss your daughter goodnight. Try it; see how well you like it. I can guarantee unless you're a totally heartless-deadbeat-bastard sociopath or something, you would feel like you'd been kicked in the stomach repeatedly. You would sense the desperate heaves of wanting to vomit, yet at the same time feel a tiny bone lodged in your burning esophagus prohibiting the vomit from rising. The guilt, shame and humiliation would make you feel lower than two-day-old shit hardened by the elements. No, that was definitely a call I didn't want to make from in there, not from that shithole of a cell. Not from any cell, for that matter. But what the hell else was I going to do? She had

to know why I wasn't coming home that night. She had to know the truth even if she didn't want to hear it and even if I didn't want to tell her. The fact that I was a sniveling, whiny, punk-assed scared little bitch with a compulsory cellmate didn't help matters much either. So the only thing I could think of to do was sit there and not say a word about it until they gave me my one phone call. I went over what I was going to say in my mind as many times as I could, but it wasn't as if I had the right words for this shameful occasion rehearsed in my head or anything. I felt less a man in there than I ever did. You can't bust another man's castanets for doing an honest day's work even if all he does is clean toilets or pick up garbage. And in my particular case, I would have no business condemning a garbage man because he made more money than me! That "sanitation engineer" was probably home with his family right about now getting ready for bed after kissing his kid good night. Where the hell was I?

So I told her, and like a lot of things that I do in my life, the timing couldn't have been much worse. Kira was colicking really badly, and I could tell from Jazz's tone that this wasn't what she needed to hear. Her voice was different than just the usual brand of upset. It was heavy. It had all the features of a harsh tone that normally would excoriate and burn the listener's ears, but it was different. Even in the short time while I pressed Alexander Graham Bell's finest invention against my ear, I heard and felt an air of resignation in Jazz's voice that just said, "I am tired." It pierced my soul and sank to the pit of my stomach where there was plenty of room to house the already searing guilt residing there.

We didn't have the kind of money it was going to

take to get me out. We were fucking stretched as it was, not destitute, just stretched out. If you don't understand being stretched, it meant that Jazz was probably running low on diapers and that I, as a supposedly good provider, was meant to be bringing home money to buy the god-damned diapers that night instead of being in jail. I'm such a fucking idiot. I bet Jazz could have used some help in getting Kira settled down while we went over the bills together. I bet Kira would have been much quieter had her daddy been home rocking her to sleep, but instead, she was screaming at the top of her lungs. She couldn't say much, but just hearing her cry in the background was enough for me to know what was happening. That's what being stretched is. Jazz was going to be late for classes worrying about my black ass there in the cage. Embezzlement was a real boon all right, a real winner of an industry. I have a habit of checking out in times like these, and my internal connection with reality was like a severed telephone wire in that shithole.

My phone call to Jazz was only three minutes long, but still I managed to sob away most of the night. I had ignored the swill called dinner that had been shoved under the door, and my cellmate had obliged. It didn't much matter, but I learned that it was indeed possible even for a fat bastard like me to eschew food. My thoughts flitted from one thing to another. I felt my head spinning, and I became sick with dizziness. They had the unmitigated gall to ask whether I suffered from a diabetic condition before they locked me up in there, and for some reason I found that deeply disturbing. I mean if Albemarle County was too fucking under funded to give me a separate holding cell, what difference would it make to them whether or not

I suffered from a diabetic episode?! Pardon my crassness. I imagined that if either one of us in here *did* fall out from an episode it wasn't going to be a big effort for them to dispose of our corpses into the convenient "dead nigger storage pit" out in the back. I mean, I don't really know if such a thing existed *per se* but I doubt Albemarle really cared about the welfare of a thief like me and whatever the hell my cellmate was, allegedly.

The silence between us was fine by me because I didn't want to talk with anybody, and I didn't want anybody talking to me either. I doubt under these circumstances I was going to be much of a conversationalist any way. All I could do was continue enduring the burning in my brain while trying to block out the sensation long enough to scribble in my journal. At least after my booking, magistrate appearance, arraignment and bond, they were kind enough to let me have that journal I was telling you about. But listen, and I mean no offense, but the journaling parts are private. I don't mind telling you about a whole bunch of other true shit about me, but I just don't wanna tell everything to you like that, okay? Some things are just private.

Dear Mr. Cosby:

I respect you almost more than I respect any other entertainer in the whole industry, but I have to ask you something. At this moment in time, and given my fucked-up circumstances, do

you really think you chose the best of times to start yelling at me? I mean I know it was wrong of me to steal, but Jazz and I were really having a hard time, and I just wanted to get her a few nice things. I mean for a while there we were getting a few nice things extra for ourselves and the baby. I TOO think it's analgesic to blame some white man for what I did, but hey, I just thought you didn't have to tell me what I already knew while I was sitting here in this shithole of a 6X9 cell. Just like I'm sure you didn't need anyone telling you that you made some mistakes in your own personal life like when you "allegedly" fondled that woman and when that other girl kept saying she was your daughter, and she wasn't a kid that you and your wife had. I did also want to tell you that I DO speak proper English, and my pants WERE in fact pulled UP at the time

they arrested me. I know you don't know me, and I most likely will never meet you, but I just wanted to say also that I don't really like the term "nigger" much either. You offer a pretty good message though, and I practically grew up on "Brown Hornet."

Sincerely,

Saul Shields

P.S. You've earned the right to say what you say about poverty, the middle class, and young African-Americans, but could you at least take off those ridiculous looking sunglasses when you speak? Thanks.

As I was pressing the ballpoint to my lips, I realized that there wasn't a whole lot more to be written, at least for that entry, and somehow I even found it cathartic. The lights were quickly extinguished and once the darkness covered me, the darkness of guilt and shame covered my body yet again. My eyes were open, yet I couldn't see much for the cell's darkness. Still, I could sense the other's presence. Before the lights went out, I admit I was too entrapt in my own affairs to get a real estimate of this other person. Despite all my best efforts to ignore him and other-

wise mind my own business, I kept sensing the heat of his stare in some form or fashion throughout the whole evening. I was always one to say that the more attention you gave something the larger it loomed, but the next time you see a pink elephant I defy you to try and ignore it.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that since he ate my dinner with no problem that he had perhaps been a guest at this fine facility before. There I was, once again ignoring my own best advice as I was beginning to take heed and grow wary of a presence drawing nearer to my body while I lay. Nothing was audible except for intermittent uneven exchanges of breath. I knew what was going to happen next, but I wasn't going to complain about it because it was too late to do me any good. That seemingly unidentified heat was his body drawing ever closer to mine which quickly became a set of thick, coarse appendages that grabbed hold of my shivering body, removed me from my bunk, hoisting me up into an upright position seemingly all in one fell swoop. First, he placed one of his meat hooks firmly against my mouth, probably in the event of a possible scream in protest, none of which was forthcoming. He then awkwardly pulled me toward his sweaty, naked body. At this point I was paralyzed with fear, while at the same time overcome with relief that this was all he wanted. I barely struggled, as I too was quickly disrobed, my khaki brown work pants fallen to my ankles and resting on the dirty cell floor. This entire moment was fumbling and surreal, almost as if in slowed motion. I just wanted this to be over. I wasn't going to scream. I was now using the ladder between our bunks to support me and I supposed I was a good height because the "stranger" was able to insert himself inside me with almost no effort, save for the excruciat-

ing pain due to lack of sufficient lubricant. Up until now, I had always hated what Bobby Knight had to say about this particular situation. What the hell else was I going to do? I just remained as calm as I could under the circumstance, relaxing, letting him have his way with me, practically tasting the salt of his now profusely sweaty body, hearing his primitive grunts and feeling him throb and convulse inside of me. Of course, it did hurt. My body's tiny cavity wasn't at all used to this painful sensation ...but I figured it was going to be over soon anyway. This was just going to be another moment to chalk up to experience, one that I would never speak of again. I didn't know for sure that he was finished until I suddenly felt his warm issue splattering against my tender posterior and trickling down in uneven streams at the back of my legs. This was followed by discernible moans of relief. He stopped abruptly. There was nothing genteel or decent in his actions at all, not even so much as a token caress. His idea of post rape affection must have been allowing me to scamper back to my bunk without further incident. Of all the magazine stories I have ever read about this, I somehow always pictured it differently. Never like this. This was all too disgustingly real and ugly. He could have at least kissed me first. Still, I suppose my brain was no longer burning because it was replaced by a dull wet, aching anus not attributable to the hardness of the standard issued Albemarle County mattresses. No offense to you, but I have to go see a man about a horse, if you don't mind.

Same Session

“Immediately after a Bathroom Break” *(The First Cut)*

The only reason I woke up that next day was because I hadn't died the night before. While the swelling had gone down considerably, there was still the all too disgusting reality of having someone else's dried residual fluids on my body. I did my best to take inventory and clean myself, but I guess I was too much in shock and more concerned with what may have been my own internal anal *bleeding* than to worry about his sexual filth the instant it happened to me. “Just get me out,” I thought to myself. I mean, if the “midnight marauder” got to bounce then surely my night in jail was worth something, right? I mean c'mon, where was the fucking justice? My car was still at the restaurant for Chrissakes...my mind was literally zooming and reeling. I was trying my best to go over all the details of my arrest and to speculate what was going to happen next. The 6 by

9 was closing in and beginning to feel more like a 5 by 5 or smaller by the second. I couldn't just remain in those fucking soiled khakis forever! Where the hell were Jazz and Kira? How much longer was I going to be in there? It was Saturday morning. Surely, Jazz wasn't just going to let me rot in jail. She just had to come up with something to get me out of there...I started feeling nauseated again as the dank smell of feces and urine began wafting through my nostrils. I felt more and more ill by the second. That cell was putrid. They had to say something to me eventually, right? I mean, they couldn't just keep on shoving that same nasty-assed food under the door all day, right? I mean I know Jazz couldn't swing the bond last night but when the hell was I going to get out? Were they just trying to make me break down and call my parents in Virginia? I think I would've been too ashamed to call them even if I could have. If you thought it was hard for me to call Jazz, I don't even want to talk about how my parents would've acted. Just then, I noticed that every single thought and question I had became a continuous swirl of echoing clamor that clashed inside of me. It sounded like a chorus of discordant voices all harshly melding together in a bizarre, contorted fashion. I didn't like it. Even when I dropped acid at parties, I was mellowed and this right here was threatening my stability. I don't like losing my grip and feeling disconnected with things. But I am a stable person. I AM A STABLE PERSON, GODDAMNIT! LISTEN TO ME WHEN I'M FUCKING TALKING TO YOU! I'm sorry for shouting, I just wanted you to put your pen down and look at me when I'm talking to you. I'm trying to tell you what happened. Anyway, getting back to what I was saying....

My temples were throbbing, and everything around

me was changing shape. I wanted to just lie down and let it pass, but whenever I lowered myself to lie down in my bunk, the smell of the toilet came raging through, assaulting my nostrils over and over again. I hadn't said a word aloud, yet my ears were ringing violently, like I had been in a shouting match with someone. But nobody else was there except for me, at least that was what I thought. I didn't see the guy who raped me from last night around anywhere. Was he just hiding out, waiting for me somewhere in the corner of the fucking cell? I needed to get a grip. It had only been a few hours. But still, where were Jazz and Kira? Perspiration began forming tiny beads that oozed from my forehead. I kept telling myself I was normal. You know I AM NORMAL, RIGHT? Listen, before you answer that, I now know that while I was in there I probably over-reacted, but I didn't know how to calm myself down, and you have to understand I was beginning to feel really claustrophobic in that cell.

Then, a little trickle of inspiration came to me, seemingly from on high. Do you ever get inspirations from on high? I think everybody does. When I was back there in that stinking cell, and it got real quiet, I had no choice but to listen. Because as you know, silence can hurt your ears. It's just as deafening to me as any horribly loud music. That's why I listened to my voice of inspiration from on high. Do you want to know what it said? You're looking at me like you do, so I'll take that as an invitation. We had a deal, remember?

"Saul."

"What is it?" I asked.

“I know a way out of this, that will make you feel so much better.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Look, you’re in a cell by yourself, right?”

“Yeah, so fucking what?” I snapped back.

“Well, if you take the sharpest object you can find and stab yourself repeatedly, I guarantee you’ll feel better. You might lose some blood, but boy, it will be worth it, my friend.”

“But I don’t have anything sharp,” I said back.

“Saul, use your brain, pal. Think. Haven’t you got a pen or something? Try that. Take the tip and dig into your arm as hard as you can. That’ll get you started.”

“Thanks,” I said back to it, “I’ll give it a try.”

After that I searched around for my ballpoint and examined it for sharpness. It was just your ordinary ballpoint, but it had some potential and was better than nothing for what I needed to do. I carefully took the tip of my pen and began gently grazing near my wrist area with the tip. The sensation tickled, and I began making tiny circles noticing how soft, sensitive, and thin the area was. The tickles gave me little chill bumps all over my body, and I quivered a bit as I fully sensed the tingling. Then, as I pressed harder, I noticed my skin beginning to give way to

the weight of the pen's tip, and as the point continued to sink, I continued to press against my swarthy flesh. Then, quite suddenly, I was rewarded for my efforts by a tiny puncture in my skin. It was the tiniest of flesh wounds, but just like striking oil, I began to witness tiny droplets of scarlet red blood rising up, bubbling, and then trickling down my arm. I marveled at the sight of it. I felt like a little kid at a science fair observing a miracle of the human body. I knew the puncture was tiny, but never the less, I began applying pressure to my arm in hopes of pumping out a bit more blood, again like the kid who can't stand to see the end of a pyrotechnics show. I felt like I had my own private home movie right there in spite of the bars that physically surrounded me. Yes, I'm telling you that despite the 6 by 9, I was beginning to feel just fine. I could not begin to describe the sense of calm I felt after it was over. My entire body relaxed, and even though I was feeling a bit woozy, it was nonetheless a good kind of woozy. I was feeling rather intoxicated and bubbly, even though I hadn't touched a drop of alcohol. It was a peaceful easy feeling, very light and almost holotropic. It was a new sensation. And this feeling was just as euphoric and trippy without the risk of flashbacks or strychnine. I liked it. I really like it a lot. I hate to keep doing this to you, but you don't have a cigarette on you, do you? I mean, I know you're a Mormon and all, but I didn't think it would hurt to ask. Anyways, I have to take another leak, but don't go anywhere; I wanted to tell you the part about Jazz leaving me.

Still the Same Damn Session

“After Yet Another Bathroom Break”

I was only guessing that it was Saturday because in there I almost lost track of time. The new sensation courtesy of my left arm had subbed out nicely as an analgesic agent that pacified my troubled mind. At least for awhile, the fetid smells emanating from the toilet hadn't the same effect on me as it had prior to the flesh wound I inflicted upon myself. I had even managed a little rest, hence the disorientation. Taking a brief survey of my body however did reveal a headache that pierced through the gossamer veil of grogginess. It was a real bitch of a headache, wicked, sharp and piercing, but the soothing feeling made it all worthwhile. Before applying my own homeopathic brand of treatment, I was thrashing about my cell like a lunatic. But now, even though both my ass and head were sore, I had a great new way of dealing with things that didn't cost a red cent. I think it's amazing what

humankind can do for itself, always thinking of new, exciting and innovative things. This was just the latest product in a long line of “self-technology” healing techniques. With this new product and masturbation, I figured I’d almost never have to leave the house again, ever. Despite all of this, however, the harsh light of day still revealed that Jazz and Kira still had not showed, and the more I thought about this, the more depressed I became. The worst part of it was that on this day I had no right to ask that question: I knew the answer already. Jazz and Kira were missing just like I was last night when I didn’t come home to them because I got caught stealing money from the company I worked for. It hurt to think of it, but it was the fucking truth and I knew it. Eventually she was going to come get me out of there, though.

The next instant they told me that I had a visitor. I knew it had to be Jazz and Kira because nobody else even knew I was staying in that cesspool, not even my parents. I was too ashamed for them to know. If my two cents ever mattered to anyone, I’d submit that Albemarle try and up their standards just a wee bit regarding how they treat their guests. After all, they weren’t really nice to me even as they showed me the way to the phone, and it was just really out of order and plain fucking rude to listen in on my conversation, but I guess they felt they had to do so. Nervously, I lifted the receiver hoping to catch a sign, even the tiniest shred of evidence showing in Jazz’s face that her heart had softened since last night, but unfortunately, for me, that wasn’t going to happen. All I saw before me through the thick glass partition was my wife as a shadow of her former self. On Thursday, for example, Jazz’s tresses were immaculately in place and full of body. Today every-

thing was disheveled and in disarray. She was not to blame for this however, I was. Thursday's child also hadn't the sallow, pale countenance that this woman in her early twenties now owned, and Thursday's eyes were a beaming azure, now dulled and grey. I was the one who ruined Thursday's child. For doing that I now felt like I deserved only six days in a week, not seven like the rest of the human race. Those dull grey eyes showed nothing for me but disdain and contempt, deservedly so. My impressions of her voice from last night over the phone were accurate. Jazz was just tired, and I got the sinking feeling that last night's tiredness over Kira's colic was just a metaphor for a much deeper exasperation that she felt. Jazz was tired. Tired of this town, tired of her situation, and what had to follow naturally, tired of me and all the bullshit that came with the package. Telling this woman "hello" was like speaking to a stranger, and the tiny daggers of ice shooting from her eyes confirmed that I really did not know Jazz today.

"Saul, I am sick of this." Her voice sounded exhausted and then she started crying. I began to hate myself even more when I saw this, like that was even possible.

"Jazz," I was begging her.

"No," she whispered with a rasp in her throat, "I have enough to get you out but we're leaving you, Saul. We're going somewhere you can't hurt us like this. I don't love you any more. I am tired of living like this. It's over. I only came down here to tell you that."

Her voice was shaky but resolute enough for me to get the point. There comes a time in your life when there is no longer any room to breathe. I had single handedly choked the life out of Jazz. My eyes welling up with tears

didn't matter. My now contorted and anguished expressions seemingly had no effect. Pressing my hands to the glass in a vain attempt to reach in Kira's general direction didn't mean anything either. Thursday's child was gone. I knew that. I fucking knew it was the truth. Jazz was not one for playing out scenes and drama. I had pushed too far and fucked up one too many times. It isn't any of your business to start with, but I kind of deserved this. You and I both know that a woman like that doesn't leave you the first time you get it wrong, and maybe not the second or third either. But I am here to tell you firsthand that everyone has their limits. Jazz was no different. I mean I know I am the one talking about it in the first place, but it still sears my soul to sit up here and admit all of this shit to you. I mean you might be asking before that day what the hell else did I do? Well, Kira wasn't our first child. I asked Jazz to terminate her first pregnancy because I was so scared of what both her and my folks might say. Hell, we hadn't even moved in together yet when all of a sudden, BOOM! We had an unplanned pregnancy to face. But you know something? If you continue to do the same stupid shit over again, and never fucking learn, just knowing that what you're doing is stupid doesn't change things. I mean, if I keep mixing blue and yellow am I somehow going to get mauve? I seriously doubt it. I am not David Copperfield, Jesus or anybody like that. I am Saul Shields. A man who has lost his family because he couldn't stop fucking up. Notice I didn't use the word "mistake" because a man is only allowed so many "mistakes" before what he does is considered just plain fucking up in my book. While you're at it, why don't you just add "baby-killer" to my wonderful list of accomplishments? I'm sorry. I don't mean to start

sobbing, but I feel like such a fucking failure. On top of that, I'm a goddamned murderer too. Do you have any idea of what that fucking feels like? I promised Jazz a different kind of life than this. She never signed on to be with somebody who would practically force her into murdering her own child. But still, you have to know that I love Kira. I truly love my baby girl. It doesn't matter how she came into this world. And if you think I'm breaking down in here now, you should've heard me pleading with Jazz. The words were almost too deeply lodged in my throat for me to speak.

“Jazz, I know what I did was really fucked-up. I hate you seeing me like this. It's not what you think. I was trying to do right by you and Kira. I need the both of you in my life. You're all I have. Please don't give up on me like this. I swear I was just trying to get us some more money. I knew it was gonna be hard for you next semester at school...”

“But fucking STEALING from your work, Saul?” she yelled back into the receiver. Something in her voice made me feel like a complete and utter ass. I should have quit talking, but common sense has never stood in my way.

“Jazz, I almost got enough together to really do some things,” I answered back.

“Then WHERE is it Saul?” She sounded so accusatory. I knew at that point nothing else that exited my pie hole was going to make any difference to her, and all I could do was look down and away in shame. I put my face in my hands and meanwhile, tried to wipe away the burn from my eyes along with the stinging mucus that was now streaming from my aching nostrils.

“Kira at least needs me, even if you don't Jazz.”

“You want her to end up like YOU?” she hissed back at me. “No way, I told you. I am tired of this. I’m fucking sick of it.”

Once she hung up the receiver, I knew it was final. I could have told you twenty minutes ago, before she and Kira showed up, that it was likely over, but there is nothing like seeing the back of your wife and nine month-old daughter literally fading from view as you sit and watch helplessly behind sheets of triple-glazed glass feeling like too big of a loser asshole to put a stop to any of it. There really is nothing like getting your just desserts. It is sweet poetic justice to reap what you sow, and in a sick yet beautiful sort of way, I was finally put out of my misery. Almost as if I were a death row inmate with all of my appeals exhausted. What else was there to do except lay there and die? I love the way life just rears up its ugly head right in the middle of all of your aspirations and plans, right smack in the middle. I loved the way my baby laid there in Jazz’s arms just sleeping away the whole time, confirming that my presence didn’t matter. What the hell did Kira need a worthless piece-of-shit father like me for? She was safe with her mother now. Jazz was leaving and going somewhere where I could not “hurt them anymore” she said. It was truly a beautiful scene, watching my wife and child walk out of my life. Plus, my anus was still sore. Don’t bother getting up; I can see myself out. Once you start talking, there just isn’t enough time in the entire fucking world.

Session 6

“Life as an Ampersand”

You knew the other day when I started telling you all of this that I was going to run out of time before I even opened my mouth, didn't you? That's how you people make your money, I guess. I mean, you know I'm fucked-up yet, you're only willing to talk to me in hourly increments. I personally think it sucks, the way you do that. However, since the Ampersands are paying for it anyway, and it is not really coming out of my pocket, then I guess it's best I shut up bitching about it, right? I just wish you would stop looking at me with that blank expression. I feel nervous when you just sit and listen to me and don't say anything back. It makes me self-conscious. I don't know if you're judging me or not, and maybe I don't *want* to know what it is you really think of me, but you could at least say *something*. Nevertheless, since you're not going to, and time is clearly not on

my side....

You probably didn't need to know that my anus was still sore from that situation in the holding cell after they arrested me, but it really did hurt. My wife and child left me too, by the way. Jazz took off with Kira, and I have no idea where they went. I need to find them. I know I messed up really bad, but I still miss them. Even if Jazz doesn't want anything to do with me, I still miss my baby. Kira means everything to me. I would die for my baby. Either that, or spend a year working as I am now, being a groundskeeper for this Mormon family that you probably already know of, the Ampersands.

After Jazz posted my bail and everything, the lawyer cut a deal with the prosecution, and they agreed to let me slide with sixteen months probation on a conditional work release program, like a halfway house type thing only more restrictive. The restaurant really wanted to see me get done to the fullest extent of the law because I had been steadily skimming virtual *assloads* off the guests and lining my server apron with that same dirty money. They must've thought since I was a waiter that somehow equated me with being just a fat, dumb-assed nigger servant or something, like my only life's purpose was to smile and get drinks for people. You know, come to think of it, I should've *spat* in every single one of their goddamned drinks. I doubt those drunken bastards would've even known the difference. I guess to them I was meant to be the fat and happy version of fucking Isaac from *Love Boat* or something. Anyway, since this was my first time caught and I had no priors, they were more lenient with me. The jails in Albemarle were teeming with violent multiple offenders, and to the courts, I was more of a "nickel and

dime” type of thief. I wasn’t really worth the time and trouble as far as the they were concerned. They told me that for about a year or so, I was to work for the Ampersand family, as I was saying to you. Do you know much about the Mormons? I guess that’s a rather asinine question since you work as a therapist for the church and everything. Anyway, they told me they would help me get my shit together. Well, they didn’t actually say “shit” because there’s no cursing in that house, but you get my point. They explained that if I did as I was told, received baptism and went on a part time mission to set an example for younger missionaries of the Ward, they could possibly have my probation reduced by a few months. Normally a guy would have to go out in the field for two whole years, but in my case they were only asking a few months. That’s really all they could get out of me anyway, by judge’s order. I guess it was an okay sounding deal at the time because I’ve been so busy working for them this entire time, that these last four months since I was raped at Albemarle have literally flown right by. My probation officer is talking like I could be done serving this out as soon as the following June, after I do some tracting with them around next March.

They were only able to set this up because the church decided to co-op with the penal system there, and a whole bunch of the wealthier Mormon families here agreed to take small-timers like me off the state’s hands in exchange for a monthly stipend and some free labor. As you know we live here in the Bible belt, and the church wanted to expand their presence in order to seek out more converts. Actually, they had just annexed a whole assload of undeveloped land for a temple, which happened to be not too far from Albemarle in the first place. No offense, but

the church is always image conscious, no matter how phony, trying to be “goody-goody” publicly, while privately receiving shitloads of tax incentives from the state to participate in programs like this. It’s similar to what they had done in the past with the Indians out in Western states on reservations or maybe with the Polynesian Culture Center. So it’s a hell of a deal for them, because they actually get paid *more* per month than it costs to keep my black ass there in the first place. I work for what they’d normally pay someone in the stir, which is basically monkeyshit. The whole set up is really similar to a modern-day-plantation, and I’m the Ampersand’s “Toby.” But it beats being locked up, and the judge told me so too. He never let me forget how lucky I was. His exact words to me were, “I have put away people like yourself for stealing television sets, Mr. Shields. You should consider yourself fortunate that I am even willing to do this. If I see you in here again, I am going to see to it *personally* that you serve out the maximum time. Common sense should tell you what to do.” Now the truth is, I thought this judge was a rednecked, bigoted sounding bastard, but he wasn’t lying when he said that about the television set. This judge had to be older than Methuselah because there really was a black guy in the 70’s that he sentenced to life for stealing a television set. It was true. Junior fucking Allen, I believe was the guy’s name. I wonder if he’ll ever get out? Anyway, I thought I was getting a second chance to do things right, you know? All I really want to do is serve this thing out and attempt to locate my baby girl. So, Albemarle shipped me out to this sweet little suburbia and hooked me up with these people, the Ampersands.

You already know Bishop Boyd from all those bull-

shit intake forms you had me filling out when I got here, right? Well, they're a typical Mormon family of six. Let's see... there's Bishop Boyd and his wife Molly, and then they have an older son, Evan, a real Steve Young type of guy, you know? He's first in his class, captain of the football team, he wants to serve on a mission, the kind of guy you'd probably go for. Next to Evan is Anna, and then they have a younger son Benjamin and a younger girl, Heidi. I know I hate it when people stereotype me as if I am just a typical *anything*, but you really have to meet these people to know what I 'm talking about. You have to be around them everyday. They seem so cookie cutter, almost like that Smart family out in Utah. Boyd is a systems analyst and consultant here in the city while Molly stays home, cooking, cleaning and putting in crazy hours for her church. The Relief Society or something, I think it's called. Her place is definitely in the home, and why the hell not? I mean, if your guy was making six figures wouldn't you stay home too? They live out in Duvall Estates for Pete's sakes, all sequestered, cloistered and sheltered from practically every damn thing. Do you know what I mean? They don't want for anything. The two youngest are a couple of cute tykes that don't say much, although you can see both "Mom" and "Dad" in their features. They look almost like fraternal twins, like a matching set of human bookends. As I said before, Evan is the jock, Boyd and Molly are both decidedly straight-laced and conservative looking in an almost nondescript sort of way. But not that Anna, though. She's different. She somehow managed to inherit auburn tresses, and flashing amber-tinted eyes. She's fair skinned like the rest of her clan, to be sure, but she has the cutest, tiniest, brown freckles and a round, intelligent face. She

has beautiful breasts, and they totally complement her shape. My wager would be that Anna's breasts were never the sort of thing discussed openly in the Ampersand family, and if so, the subject was whitewashed beyond anything a non- Mormon household would even recognize. I shouldn't even be talking about Anna's breasts like I am doing now, but if you see them, I defy you to ignore them. Anyway, in that household, you'd get the feeling that Boyd would have them believe the world was made of pink marshmallows and little fluffy clouds, and that Anna was seven instead of almost seventeen.

Now, I say all this as if I know them well enough to have my own private entrance and house key, but that's not exactly the case. You have to understand how things are set up. The church asks for a profile of what a person did in the first place to land themselves in jail. Before the state released me into the Ampersands' custody, Bishop Boyd also sat down and "interviewed" me. I don't know if I can talk about this without getting so pissed off that I want to cry, and if that makes me a sissy or something, then I guess I'll just have to be a sissy. That's the reason I'm here in the first place, right? He asked me in the interview about *masturbation*, for Chrissakes, and whether or not I practiced it on a regular basis, you know, whether or not my thoughts were clean. I was embarrassed, to say the least, because look, I paddle my oar probably more times daily than you'd care to know about, but I didn't want him knowing that, you know? Don't look at me like that. Besides the fact that spanking your monkey just feels so damned good, it's also supposed to prevent prostate cancer, no bullshit. I'd personally recommend masturbation to everyone. Just think of how much money the Catholic Church would have

saved in lawsuit damages if every priest in every diocese had little rooms they could go into with computers that had porn downloaded especially for them. I mean, it's better that they touch themselves than an unsuspecting altar boy, right? Why are you looking at me like that? It's just an idea, for Chrissakes, and the last time I checked, private pornography sites don't cost anywhere *near* the millions of dollars those guys are having to pay out. Masturbation is perfectly normal, natural and healthy. So why not just go on and "beat the bongo?" That's what I say. Otherwise, I think you're just repressing yourself. What? You're looking at me like I'm going to handle my business right here in the office, but that is hardly my intent. I'd never dream of being so utterly disrespectful. I'm just telling you the God's honest truth about it. If you can't handle hearing about this kind of stuff, you're in the wrong business.

Anyway, I didn't want to blow my chance at getting the hell out of Albemarle, so I put up with his bullshit line of questioning through the entire interview. He claimed he would be able to tell if I was lying to him about my masturbation or anything else I had done because he had the gift of "discernment" or some such nonsense. I think you know me well enough by now to know that I thought he was full of horseshit, and really, I could have told him anything I wanted to, but sometimes you have to go along, to get along. He asked me about Kira and then asked me if I had lustful thoughts about other men. He actually had the nerve to ask me whether I was bisexual, or worse yet, as he put it, a "totally sinful" homosexual. Where did that even come from? What the hell was I supposed to say? I guess I must have fucked up when I hesitated on that question, which is why I am here spouting this off to you now. But

you had to have known that already, right? I mean, don't you *also* have some sort of "gift" of discernment? Isn't everybody in this whole fucking organization a trained expert in "queer detection?" I bet you are. What gave me away? Was it my *Sponge Bob Square Pants* t-shirt, the one you've seen me wearing in here before? I bet you probably *do* have a test devised like the fucking *Luscher* or something that registers pink for queer, grey for "bi," and COBALT FUCKING BLUE if I'm a *real* man, right? So yeah, WHERE IS IT? Where's your "queer detection kit?" You think I'm being paranoid or something, don't you? Well, why not tell those *Orwellians* on the Family Council that you don't fucking fix these kinds of things, whether I register as 'bi-sexual grey' on your little queer kit or not. I told you I was going to get pissed off if I talked about it. Being pissed is the only thing keeping me from bawling in front of you again, though. Do you mind if I have a tissue? Thanks, and I don't mean to go off on you, but as I was saying to you before, I hate this entire fucking process with a passion. They thought it would be a good idea for me to see someone like you, so I would be considered "worthy" to go spread the gospel before I actually went out tracting with the missionaries. I guess they wanted me free of "impure" thoughts. Maybe they were afraid I'd pitch a tent in my pants while we were out witnessing or something. Now, I have nothing against missionaries, mind you, because in the *Advocate* a while back I saw an article on gay missionaries in the church. They were cute, especially in those white shirts, but just not my type. A bit young for my taste. Oh, dear, I'm doing that whole digression thing again, aren't I? Where was I? Oh yeah, I'm pissed because they want you to somehow "fix" me. But Goddamnit,

American Psychiatric tells me differently, and I trust them way more than the *Book of Mormon* or the *Bible* either, for that matter. No offense to you, though. Yeah, yeah, sure the Ampersands are giving me a place to live, but I bet you would too if the state paid you, right? I mean as far as I can see, the only thing I'm really good for according to Bishop Boyd is manual labor. Why *hire* a Mexican who carries a leaf blower with him at all times when you can have an in-house resident nigger to do all that kind of work for free? I mean, it's not like you'd hear the Bishop say things like "resident nigger" aloud in front of the family or the congregation, but still, I know my place. He told me up front to keep socializing to a minimum, and except for meals, laundry, and Family Home Evening, where we sit around on Monday nights reading verses from the *Book Of Mormon*, I'm not allowed in the house. None of the kids are supposed to come out back to my area, either. My typical workday is eight to ten hours just doing odd jobs like cutting grass, pruning hedges, cleaning the pool, digging up the yard, pulling weeds, whatever they ask of me. "Chez Shields" is just like one of those little efficiencies you see in hotels. I have my own bathroom with running water, a little one-ring cooker and a single cot with a tiny night-stand and lamp. Part of the limited space quandary is actually my own fault because after I went back to where Jazz and I used to stay, I gathered up all of my music and books. I have an embarrassing heap of books and music that I keep cramped up in my space. They don't seem to care what I read or listen to, which is good, I guess. I know I talk about a lot of things you never asked me about, but you have to understand that I'm not some dumb ass just because I went off the rails for a minute, you know. I love to read, tons,

and I appreciate the hell out of music. I already told you I wanted to be a popstar while I was in England, remember?

See, if you'd known me outside of here, you would have thought differently about me. But instead, you just sit there staring because you don't know any differently when you look at me now. I know it's not easy to see either, but have I mentioned I was a lot thinner back then, too? I feel like you're just sitting there and letting me babble because you don't know what to make of me. Look, I already admitted I don't claim to know what you actually think of me, but would it kill you to at least say *something*?

You may be wondering what kind of books I read? Well, it would be easier to say what I don't read about because everything interests me, but I especially love to read philosophy, theology, politics, psychology, social theory, you name it. All of them from Ayn Rand (I named my baby girl after a character in one of her novels) to Karl Marx. From Josh McDowell to Anton LaVey. David Duke to Malcolm X. It doesn't matter to me. I could barely finish *The Book of Mormon* before I started reading the *Urantia* (paper 64 page 722 really pissed me off, though). It's just that I love to read, read, and read until my eyes hurt. The information doesn't have to be practical, just interesting. I think Thomas Troward is a genius even though other people think he's boring. I think L. Ron Hubbard is a maniac, but some of his ideas were good. What kind of music? Hell, everything. I always was and still am a huge pop, new wave and disco junkie. I love Pet Shop Boys, Erasure and Soft Cell. However, I also like the classics. Easy listening, cheesy type shit like Ambrosia. I love that last line where he says that even when he makes love to his wife, he still sees this other woman's face. You can tell that guy

was really in love. I listen to hip-hop too. You don't look like the hip-hop type, though. I will even listen to country. How about you? Why does your unbridled silence not surprise me? Listen, I know you didn't ask me aloud what kind of books I read; you didn't ask me what kind of music I listen to, either, but for some reason, I just feel better about telling this to you now. And even though you're still not saying anything, at least, I feel like you might be listening to me after all. Or maybe, you're just passing time and I am just fooling myself. I don't even remember my point except I thought I was going to tell you about Anna and how cute I think she is, which is probably illegal given my age, if not at least immoral? She's nothing like the rest of her family. Not at all. When I first got there, she was the only one who didn't treat me like that big black guy in *Green Mile*. Yeah, I know it isn't pretty to see my dark, dirty, sweating skin after I get done pruning hedges or tilling the flower garden. I swear to you right here and now, being black isn't a disease, and to my knowledge no white person that I can think of has ever turned black by merely being in my presence. Bishop Boyd acts like I'm fucking contagious. Okay, so I look gritty when I come inside to change up. I probably smell of the outdoors too. But does that really mean you have to avoid eye contact with me? Anna didn't think so. That's part of how we became friends in the first place.

Listen, I can see you rising up because we only had an hour to begin with, but next time maybe I can tell you about Anna. This is exactly what I meant from the other session about this being like my seeing a prostitute. Once it's over, it's over until next time. Yeah, yeah, I'm going, and you don't have to act like you're holding the door open

for me when you're really just telling me to leave, it's insulting.

Session 7

“Nat Sherman and the Beauty of the Blade”

Like I was saying before you ran me out of here last time, I was going to tell you about Anna. She actually came by my efficiency one night, and we really got a chance to talk for the first time. She kind of busted in on me while I was in the middle of getting ready to cut myself again, and I was also writing my thoughts down, which, like I was saying before, is my own private space for myself. Again, it's no offense to you; it's just that I have to keep some things private, even from you. You already know how I am about coming in here and prattling on about things that have no relevance, like dreaming and journaling. I already don't get enough time in here as it is, so why make it worse by reading entries to you? That would just take up more time that we already don't have.

Dear Diary:

Things are going okay out here at Duvall estates, I guess, and I guess things could be a lot worse. I haven't seen nor heard from Kira or Jazz, and they wouldn't know where I was anyway. Neither would my parents except for the letters I send them occasionally. There is nothing like lying to your parents about why you can't come and see them. It's great being on probation and "house arrest" like Jose Canseco. It's wonderful to have to be in by 9pm or else. I also can't get enough of the family home evenings on Monday nights. I just love being spoon fed Mormon doctrines and beliefs that directly conflict with my own. I don't think Joseph Smith was a prophet, and I certainly don't think "the church is true." But what am I gonna do; say all of that stuff aloud in front of them

right in the middle of family home evening? Molly would have a heart attack if I said some shit like that while I was in the house. I should be grateful. It's not that I am ungrateful per se, but you have to admit, the Ampersands are getting a sweet deal out of this. I mean, I do this shit for practically nothing, and they get paid more per month by the state just for keeping me here. And what's this garbage about me going on a mission next summer? So I get to work for them, plus go out and tract for them too. Great. It really does beat the hell out of jail, though not by much, actually. Before all of this shit happened, if you would have told me it even could have happened, I would have said you were full of it. But here I am.

Now, I do have to ask myself, though, what about this new therapist? She sure is awfully quiet. I know I

bitch at her during the sessions sometimes, but I never said she wasn't exquisite from head to toe. She really is beautiful, like a still life painting.

When I close my eyes and picture her, I see a quintessential woman with fine, delicate features. Her nose is gaunt, yet elegant. I love her piercing hazel eyes. When she looks at me, I feel the warmest glow in my heart. I know I told her that I felt like a piece of shit when she looked at me before, but that's because I feel so ugly in her presence. I love the way her eyes change to that aqua green under the fluorescent lights and every time she wears those black rimmed glasses; they make her look especially intelligent and sexy. I love that in a woman. It's just like the therapists you see in the movies, well either that or one of those studious looking librarians. I can't make up my mind which. She also wears the most

magnificent looking tresses, and whether her hair is up or down, it's like the ninth wonder of the world to me. I just know that I like it either way, but for some reason when she wears it down and her locks descend past her shoulders, my heart flutters. Her skin looks so fair and smooth like a piece of porcelain, but her face has character. Sensitive. I often like sneaking a look at her long thin hands, and I marvel at how graceful and poetic she is in using them to illustrate a point on the rare occasions when she actually does speak. All I really know about her is that her name is Virginia O'Callah, licensed therapist that also works on behalf of the church, but what's her end game? I go in there and talk and talk, and all she does is sit there and listen to me. I wonder if she even cares that I cut myself to sleep at least twice if not three times weekly? She noticed the

scars, I know. That's why I said something, but she really didn't ask me directly. She also knows I am bisexual, but that didn't seem to get her going either. Mormons have a hard time dealing with shit like that. They seem to think all of the world's problems and ills are caused by sin. I beg to differ. I think sin is an effect and not a cause of anything. She really has me mystified. I know the Ampersands are paying her to straighten me out with short-term counseling and reparative therapy, yet Virginia still doesn't judge me. She doesn't act like Bishop Boyd at all. It just makes me wonder-

Just then, I heard an abrupt knock on the door that nearly scared the shit out of me. The knock itself wasn't all that loud; it was more the way in which it completely interrupted my train of thought.

“Saul?” I was surprised to hear it was Anna.

“What is it? I mean c'mon in.” I tried to sound inviting, even though she startled me.

“Look, I won't bother you if you're sleeping,” she said. So I hid my journal and cutting blade fast, then got

up to open the door completely, the one she had just opened a crack. I pulled myself together and tried being polite. After all, I didn't want any friction with Bishop Boyd over me being rude to any one in the family.

“Saul?” She was acting real cautious around me.

“Yeah? What's up? Did you need something done?”

“No, no,” she answered me. “I just wanted to ask you about something. You know how you have all of those books?”

“Yeah...I guess, why.” It was clear I didn't know where this was going exactly.

“I mean, I just wanted to ask you if you had anything about the Mormon Church in there.”

“What type of stuff do you mean, exactly?”

“I mean stuff that tells about the church. I have questions about it, and don't get mad, but one time when you were out at your appointment, I just noticed that you had books lying around. Plus, you seem smart. I mean, my parents told me I'm not even supposed to be out here talking to you, like you're some kind of...” I interrupted her. I didn't think I liked the direction this conversation was going.

“Listen,” I started, “I don't want any trouble here. If you have questions about the church, why not just ask your parents?”

“Because,” she protested, “I don't think they will tell me the whole truth about it. One of my classmates said some stuff to me about it today, and it really bothered me.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I mean, just stuff about the cities in the *Book of Mormon* not being real.” She held her head down almost

as if she were ashamed to admit that she had a sneaking suspicion that her classmate might be right.

“Anna,” I said slowly, “I don’t mind talking to you, but I just don’t want any trouble in the house. You know I could get in trouble for saying things in here about the church. But I am not gonna lie to you. I have a whole bunch of shit about the church if you want to look at it. What I want to know is how and when you started to question this stuff in the first place?”

“Because,” she said, “I have felt like this a long time. Ever since I was like thirteen years old. I tried to ask Evan, but all he says is that I need to have faith in the prophets and faith in the church. It didn’t answer anything for me at all.” She hung her head again, “Saul, I don’t think the church is true AT ALL. I think it’s a lie.”

Then all of a sudden, her eyes started welling up with tears. I felt like I was going to be in big trouble. To this point, Bishop Boyd hadn’t said anything to me about what to read or what not to read, what music I could or could not listen to either, but I was willing to bet anything that if he caught wind of one of his daughters thinking like this and MY name came up in the conversation, I was going to feel the heat.

“Listen Anna, I don’t want Bishop Boyd coming in here and blaming me for some sh...”

“Saul, don’t you think I am old enough to make up my own mind?” she shrieked at me.

“I know you are, Anna. That’s not what I meant. Look,” I continued on, “I never have believed in the church from day one. I am only here because the state said that I could have a second chance this way, you understand?” She nodded. “I only did this because if I serve out my probation

here I can be free instead of going to jail. Then I can go try to find Kira.”

“Where is she?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Anna; I wish I knew. Maybe back in Virginia? I honestly have no fucking clue. Jazz never said where she and Kira were going.”

She stayed quiet, pursed her lips, and then started up again. “Saul, can I ask you something else?”

“What’s stopping you, Anna?” It was rude of me to sigh right in front of her, but I was becoming exasperated.

“Do you smoke cigarettes?”

“What?”

“Cigarettes.”

“Anna, I—”

“C’mon, seriously, Saul. Do you?”

“No.” I denied it, but I was lying.

“Well, you’re not gonna tell on me are you?” Then she pulled out a box of Nat Shermans almost as if she knew they were my favorites, and she was trying to tempt me with them.

“Anna, I don’t want those things stinking up the room in here. They can smell...”

“Then let’s go outside behind the back.”

“C’mon, Anna, I am not up for all this sh...”

“Saul,” she cooed, “don’t be like that.”

“What time is it Anna?” I asked, as if the most important thing really was the time and not the fact that I was actually contemplating going out behind the shed and having a smoke with the Bishop’s teenage daughter.

“It’s like 9:45. Everybody is inside, and they don’t even know I came out here.” She was bragging big time,

like she did this sort of thing all the time. I couldn't really believe it at first.

“Okay c'mon, I wanna burn one with you, and we will talk about the church. If you say anything though, I swear I'll...”

Just then, she pressed her bony index finger against her pursed lips as if to say, “hush.” This event was going into the “vault.” There I was, once again on the verge of doing something monumentally stupid. Let's review: Anna is the Bishop's teenage daughter who somehow has in her possession my favourite brand of cigarettes ones that I have tried to swear off....I am practically thirty years old and on probation for stealing money from my job. A judge has since told me that if I did anything relating to misconduct that I was going to serve out exactly what the prosecution recommended. Still, it was pure kismet that she actually had some Nats on her that came in the grey box. So we went out back to light up. I never saw a teenager whip out a lighter and fags so quickly, including the two milliseconds it took her to light up and take her first puff. Then she took another cigarette out and passed it to me. Her motions were so smooth. I wondered where a teenaged girl reared in a Mormon household could have possibly picked up on how to handle a cigarette like that. I'm trying to tell you how impressed I was with her.

Smoking may increase your risk of cancer and heart disease, but I am here to tell you first hand that if you have ever smoked and then kicked, but you secretly took pleasure in it in the first place, there is nothing like nicotine rushing back into your bloodstream. I closed my eyes as I was puffing. Smoking never tasted so good. I had to forget the Surgeon General's warning because every drag tasted

like freedom, and I was feeling my old self again.

“Anna,” I said slowly, “now I’m gonna tell you what you want to know about the church. It’s fraudulent, okay? That’s rule number one.”

“Well, why, exactly?” She seemed eager.

“Okay,” I said, puffing on my cigarette. “First of all your classmate was right when she said there are no real Mormon cities that you’ll find on an actual map, outside of Utah. The city names in the *Book of Mormon* are bogus. There’s no real archeological evidence for them. The idiot apologists keep trying to come up with some, but I’m telling you, it’s bullshit.”

She nodded studiously, as if I had been the expert voice she needed to hear to confirm her feelings about the church all along.

“Secondly,” I said, “If you read the Book of Mormon, you will find what’s called anachronisms all through it.” I guess she could tell I wasn’t a dumbass, because I knew words like that. Some of the things written about simply didn’t exist in the period of time the book claims. You want some examples? Take...”

“Horses,” she interrupted me.

“Yeah, fucking hey, horses, I was just going to say that! How’d you know I was gonna say that?” I think Anna actually knew these answers all along but just wanted someone to say them aloud to her. She smiled and gently squinted while she took another drag off her cigarette. I loved the way her tiny nose crinkled and how the moonbeams touched her face. I felt a tingle run through me. I felt like Anna and I bonded or something. I needed a friend, and maybe, it was okay to have one now. Maybe it was okay to befriend someone even if it was an

Ampersand. I mean, what was wrong with it? The friendship portion of it, I mean. I could easily find plenty of things wrong with me sharing puffs with a teenager at ten PM behind my living quarters. Well, yeah, I guess if you feel like picking on me about it, there was a lot wrong with the entire fucking picture over all, but Anna was totally all right by me. She really was.

“Thirdly,” I continued, “the church held a restrictive ban on black males becoming priests until around 1978. In the standard church, the same holds true for women today. Look Anna, I didn’t want to get all deep on you like that. I mean...” Suddenly she burst out laughing, and I felt uncomfortable when she did that.

“What’s so funny?” Nothing irritates me more than when a person starts laughing when I’m trying to be serious.

“So *that’s* why my dad acts like that!” she howled. “I had been trying to figure out why he always acted so funny about black people; now I can see why. Stupid bullshit doctrines like this. My dumbass–bigot father almost made me feel afraid to come out here and start talking to you, Saul. Like you were going to do something to me. He would never come out and say anything directly mean or racial, but he just always acted so goddamn weird around the black members in his congregation, almost like he was never quite comfortable with them even being there at church. He didn’t want me bringing any black classmates home, either. Personally, I could never tell the difference, but he just acted like talking face to face with a black person outside of church was so wrong. If I hadn’t become so curious about all those books you had in your efficiency, I never would’ve come out here because of being

afraid. My dad teaches out of *fear*. This whole thing makes sense to me now. My dad would just as soon give you the shirt off his back because he's a Mormon Bishop, but not out of respect for you as a person. Go figure. This makes me think even more that the church is full of it."

She could tell by the look on my face. I was completely floored by what she was saying. I was, in fact quite amazed at her insights, and I told her I hoped I shed some light on some of her questions. The main thing I was saying to her is that the church's geographical claims are bogus, the *Book of Mormon* has stuff in it that wasn't even discovered at the time it was written, and they treated women and minorities like shit. No offense to you, but you can look that up if you don't want to take my word for it.

"Listen," she went on, "I had my doubts about all this before, Saul. Now I just have to face the fact that I know the church is the biggest load of monkey dung ever, of all time. That's why I started crying in front of you like that. I don't know what to do anymore."

"Well, if you decide to change your mind again, we never had this conversation, Anna. I am only telling you this because you insisted on knowing. What I'm telling you is nothing new, and here's that book if you still wanted to read up on it. What I told you doesn't even cover the half of it. The church calls anything that challenges its authority 'anti-material.' As if merely pointing out that certain metals, weaponry, and animals didn't even exist in the Western Hemisphere at the times the book claims makes me somehow 'against' the goddamn church. Listen, I am not against any particular so-called church at all, Anna. I am against lies, dogma and propaganda. It doesn't matter where the dogma, lies or propaganda comes from,

either. The same thing would go for dime-a-dozen ‘Fundie Christians’ too. I think somebody must have stolen my 21 grams or something, ‘cos I am no longer feeling it.”

“Your 21 grams of what?” She asked like she was really curious.

“Well,” I explained, “you’re supposed to be like 21 grams lighter than your body weight when you die, and that’s meant to be your soul. I don’t know how true it is, but if it is, somebody has got mine, and if it isn’t, then it never existed in the first place.”

It was late, and so we said goodnight. I headed back to my efficiency with the lingering aftertaste of Nat Sherman tobacco swirling in my mouth. I gently closed the door behind myself, plopped down onto my cot and pulled the blade out from under the spot where I had hidden it from Anna. Most people prefer brushing their teeth as a last rite before retiring for bed, and with the state of my putrid tobacco-laced breath I should have done that, but the beauty of the blade was beckoning to me. Do me a favor and try not to judge me when I tell you firsthand that there is a fine, delicate and subtle art to cutting one’s self. I try and find just the right spot and let the blade guide me rather than the other way round. You see, you have to actually be the blade. Unify with it. I like gently running the cold steel against my warm flesh because of the contrasting temperatures on my skin. It gives me goose bumps. This is how I really get in touch with my inner self. I think this is something everybody should try, and report back to me if you disagree that the bouquet of bathroom antiseptics coupled with the sweet taste of your own blood doesn’t give you a rush. You look at me like that only because you have not tried it. Actually, it’s sublime.

Anyway, Anna is a neat girl, isn't she? I told you she was different. Smoking may kill me, but hell, at least I'll get to make a friend along the way, right? I didn't mean to change the subject, but you know when I cut myself, if I do it the right way, I usually just wake up the next day. I don't remember anything most of the time. Does that mean I black out, or just fall asleep? Isn't it the same thing? Either way, my eyes are closed. I know it's time to wrap up for now, but hey, at least I got to tell you about Anna. And hey, don't look so upset; blades are beautiful. Anyway, I can see my ride outside. Thanks.

(Out Of) Session 8

“Saul’s First Vision”

On the Road to Damascus
(*Spiritual Currency*)

From this vantage point, I can now see everything. I can see my dark, naked, corpulent, empty vessel lying prostrate on a dingy semen stained cot, and I can clearly observe the now ceased trickle of blood flow that only mere hours ago was issuing freely from my vein like some sort of scarlet milky substance.

The closest I’ve ever come to this state of beingness was dropping a little acid and then watching a movie with a guy being impaled to death after he cut a puppy wide open on a kitchen table. I had empathy pains in my side for the both of them, especially the puppy, while my eyes were fixated on the screen. However, even that was nothing compared to this. I was staring at my own dead body in all its grotesque, lifeless form. What the fuck? I mean, what do you say on an occasion like this? I wanted to go

near myself and start poking just to see what would happen, but then I remembered how sick to my stomach I became when my younger brother touched my dead grandmother at her funeral. So I refrained. I was now seeing my corpse through a different pair of eyes, floating and weightless. I found myself originating from no one particular point source in space or time, being everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Just what the hell am I? Where the hell am I? Besides lying there dead on the cot, I mean.

Just then, a beaming cascade of incandescent light emerged, filling up the entire space I was occupying, and even it shone with enough brilliance to cause my cadaver to shimmer and bathe in its effulgence. This Presence, or whatever the hell it must have been, was the still of silence. I felt what I thought would have been a sliver of warmth, but I am not sure I truly would have been able to distinguish; I was only speculating. For whatever form I was in, I felt a deep desire to know. I wanted to ask, but I had no mouth from which to speak. In the flash of a second, the Presence began to vibrate in my general direction in the form of some sort of speech, and by this time, I knew because I now somehow had "spiritual" ears from which to hear sound.

"Saul," a dulcet toned, yet unwavering, female voice beckoned.

"I don't . . . What is this?" I was confused because only a moment ago I had no mouth from which to speak from, but when this voice spoke to me, I felt a power rush through me, compelling me to speak.

"I'm not surprised you don't recognize me, since you hardly let me get a word in edgewise during our sessions."

Upon hearing these words I began to feel my form-

less essence quiver, and I sensed a sudden sharp pang of recognition. It was an uneasy, disturbing feeling. I now knew this voice to be none other than Virginia O'Callah. Though I could hear the softness in her tone, there was still a harsh sense of irony that began permeating my beingness, for whatever amorphous form I was. She now had the upper hand, and I was now at her mercy, having to hang upon her every word of command if I was going to make sense of this episode at all.

“What do you want me to say?” I responded weakly.

“Do you have a spiritual connection, Saul?” she asked me directly.

“I don’t think so.” This was going to be my stock answer, even in a situation like this. I kill myself sometimes with my own bullheadedness and stupidity.

“Well then Saul, I give up. You’re right. I guess you’re nothing more than the dead corpse you see before you.” She spoke matter-of-factly, with a chilly air of indifference. She spoke as if she was an incarnation of the non-existent god I had been denying within myself all of these years, and now it was simply time to answer for it. She spoke nothing of hellfire and brimstone or gnashing of teeth but for some reason my form was now feeling miserably cold and empty.

“I don’t understand then,” I protested. “I don’t know what you mean when you ask me about a spiritual connection.”

“Let me ask you this, Saul. Have you ever actually seen your own brain; ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

“No,” I replied sheepishly, “I’ve never actually seen my own brain.”

“Then how do you know you actually have one?”

Since you can't witness your *own* physical brain with your own two *physical* eyes, where does the knowledge come from that you actually have a brain?"

"I guess I don't really know." Hell, I really *didn't* know. I mean, to be honest I was still trying to work out what the fuck was going on here.

"It comes from the 'eye' of the 'I', Saul. That's where the knowledge comes from. It's something you can't experience with your five senses. It makes no difference what you call it, whether it be 'Atma', 'essence', 'psyche', 'soul'... .. there's some awareness by which you discern and perceive outside your physical senses. To make it easy though, let's just say it represents 7 grams of soul."

"Okay, whatever you say." As if I were in any sort of position to argue.

"Now, it's obvious to me by how much you talk during our sessions that you have strong beliefs and opinions about things. That's the next part that makes up the essence of your soul, Saul. Again, it doesn't matter what you call it; some people will say it's 'Manas', or to some it's just 'belief'. You know you can't see someone's beliefs under a microscope but if they weren't real on some plane of existence, why else would people be willing to die for them? Why else would people kill over them? If you had to measure 'belief', it would be 7 grams." I had to be silent, and just let her speak. After all, that's what you do when you have nothing to say.

"Saul, another thing I notice is that you expend a lot of energy being unfocused and scattered. It's a psychic waste of time. You're dissipating yourself. You're dissipating your energies."

"How so?" I asked like an eager pupil, hanging on

her on every word. I was hungry.

“The last component of the soul is your energy, or emotion Saul. Just like I said to you about thought and belief, the label for this isn’t important. Some people refer to your energy as ‘Buddhi’. It’s the spiritual heart that beats within your soul. It sends out vibrations to the Universal. And just like the other two components, it weighs 7 grams.”

I tried my best to soak up all I could, and for the first time in my life, I continued to sustain a silence and just listen. To try and listen without prejudice was hard for me, because cynicism was my lifeblood. Virginia seemed to know even at that moment that I was struggling with myself not to open my mouth until I heard what I needed to, but undaunted, and with the patience of a saint she continued.

“Now what I have told you is seven, seven, and seven, Saul. The number ‘7’ is a perfect number representing spirituality. Each component of the soul is part of a perfect unified whole, a trinity of thought, belief, and emotion. When you add all the elements of a soul together what number do we receive?” I was almost afraid of answering her, but under the circumstances felt I could be forgiven for a wrong response.

“Twenty-one?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yes, Saul, twenty-one. Twenty-one grams of soul is what you have within your form. I cannot take it out of you and show you, but you can think of it as Spiritual Currency on loan from the Universal Bank of Consciousness. It’s a collective, the Universal I was speaking of earlier.”

“What the hell is the ‘Universal?’” I didn’t mean to sound rude, but I was beginning to feel confused again.

“God.” She answered plainly.

“I don’t believe in God” I answered back, but now taking a slightly haughty tone.

“What are you afraid of Saul?”

Suddenly I felt a warm sensation pervade me, and my form began pulsating, like that of a beating heart. My form began quivering once again, and I remained speechless as Virginia resumed.

“No one can convince you that God exists. Believe me, it’s been tried for millions of years, through all sorts of guilt, threats and intimidation, but let me say this, if you’re truly an atheist as you claim, then that means you’re willing to take on the full consequences of God’s nonexistence. Even an atheist believes in something, Saul, whether the atheist chooses to call that something ‘God’ or not.”

“I know you think you’re casting pearls here,” I replied, “but I do not see the evidence of a God, and all man has ever done throughout history is create a self- serving hierarchy through which all religious dogmas would have you believe that their truth is what God wants you to believe.”

“Do you know what God wants from you, Saul?”

I paused, curious as to the answer, then took the bait.

“What does God want from me?”

“Absolutely nothing.” She answered in a matter of fact tone, as if the question that had been the bane of mankind’s existence for aeons was now being resolved in the form of a single, simplistic answer.

“What the hell do you mean ‘nothing’?” I challenged.

“God is already all there is, Saul. God is above you, below you, through you and is the essence of everything. So God doesn’t want anything from you at all. Listen, God is not some old man up in the sky that punishes you every time you make a mistake. That’s superstition. You aren’t punished *for* your actions; you’re punished *by* them. I don’t think the existence of God is your problem, Saul. It’s the way you relate to God. I’ll never be able to prove this to you if you don’t believe it, but matter doesn’t create mind, Saul.”

“So?” I replied indignantly.

“So you’ll wake up *denying* this entire experience and the fact that you couldn’t speak, hear or feel when I first began talking. It was ‘mind’, your individualized mind that created the objective reality of you being able to speak, hear and feel. You cannot escape something just because you deny its existence, Saul. Denying your own thoughts is like trying to escape your own shadow. It cannot be done, and it’s futile to try. You and your thoughts are one, INEXTRICABLE. The 21 grams of Spiritual Currency you have is yours to spend however you wish to spend it. The only thing you’re responsible for is what you spend it on. You can use it up complaining about a life you brought into existence with your own currency, your own thoughts, or you can use it to find that beautiful daughter of yours. It’s your choice, Saul. Your thoughts, beliefs, and emotions are an INEXTRICABLE part of the whole. If you ask for a loaf of bread, the Universal will never give you a stone. Everything is done unto you as you believe. Speaking of food, are you still hungry?”

“Hungry for what, exactly?” I was really almost afraid to ask her that question.

Virginia's laugh was like the chorus of a thousand angels.

"Fish, do you enjoy fish?"

"Yeah, I enjoy fish." By the end of Virginia's long soliloquy, I was feeling famished even in the physical sense, and I was going to eat whether the food came from some crazy-assed dream or not. I certainly knew how to eat, which was no secret at all.

The words of wisdom she imparted to me both seared and soothed, and in the next instant, the omnipresent, incandescent light began to shimmer and Virginia's seemingly nebulous presence began to transfigure itself. What I witnessed before me was a celestial being that expressed itself as the breathtakingly beautiful woman I sat across from and routinely bitched at during sessions.

As I admired and reflected upon Virginia's heavenly beauty expressing itself as an earthly body, I began to sense my own body again and found it seated before a plate full of fish. Virginia quietly sat down at the table next to me. I smiled across the table in her direction with tacit thanks, and together we began to dine. As the succulent morsels began forming their taste upon my palate, I recalled a verse from the Bible and realized that Virginia's wisdom truly was "the bread of life." I also discovered that 'God' is actually a woman who can cook her ass off, and all she wanted me to do was eat the cooking that came from her kitchen.

Session 9

“The Rattigan”

On the Eve of a Wasted Baptism
(*While playing ‘Marco-Polo’*)

Do you think God gets pissed off at wasted baptisms? Do you think God gets pissed if you’re the one who’s wasted at your own baptism? I really don’t know either, but I do know I felt like tossing my cookies after that Saturday night at the Rattigan. What the hell is the ‘Rattigan’, you ask? Well, it’s a gay discotheque over in Hexyl district. They spin some excellent tunes over there. We should go sometime. Remember me telling you how cool I thought Anna was? Well she really is, and you’d have thought the same thing after what went on that night.

This is what happened. was Anna had thought a lot about what I was saying to her about the church and all. She was bummed out most of the week over our conversation and she asked me if I would go with her over there to Hexyl district. She told me she even cut class to go buy a new outfit for it. It was the tightest fitting black dress I’d

ever seen. I'm not that old, mind you, but it seems the kids are changing everyday. When I was coming up, the girls developed so much slower. I can only imagine what Kira will look like at Anna's age, that is, if I ever get to see Kira again. You know what? Come to think of it, if I do find Kira, I'll be so damned grateful she's in my life again that I doubt I'll bitch about her dress being too tight when she's Anna's age.

Anyway, at first I didn't even want to go because I was afraid of Anna and me catching hell if we were caught creeping, but all week long, Bishop Boyd had been riding my ass about taking baptism. So I agreed to do it that next Sunday morning. After all, I had put it off for as long as I could, and I was already doing everything else they asked, including going to church. I just didn't think I was really going to have to go through with it. The whole baptism thing, I mean. I knew they couldn't actually make me convert, but I was looking at the fact that if I didn't go along with them, Bishop Boyd might decide to say something negative about me to the parole officer supervising my case. If that happened things might not work out there, and I wouldn't have an ice cube's chance in hell at finding Kira and Jazz. You have to understand, Jazz's parents were never too crazy about me, and so do you think they actually would give a rat's ass if somehow I disappeared from Jazz's life altogether, no matter how it had to happen? I can tell you that they wouldn't. I don't even remember the York's actual address up in Virginia for one. Plus, I don't know for an absolute fact that Jazz even went back to Virginia. I'm only guessing. And as for my parents, don't even get me started. I was still sending them letters and purposely omitting the fact that I had been in the hoosegow

and was now staying with the Ampersands. So, it would have really raised their hackles if I had begun asking questions about Kira like I didn't know where my own damned family was, which I didn't, but you get my point? For all I know, my folks could have already visited Albemarle and found our old place vacant, not even having a clue as to why. That's what happens when you lose touch with everybody. In the old days when a person was incarcerated, I heard people just say that they "went away to school." I only wish I could say that. How do I even know that Jazz hasn't told my parents everything she knew about my being locked up? Hell, I don't know. I'm just trying to figure a way out of this. That's why, to my mind, it was just best to go along with what they wanted. I was never sincere in the least about a Mormon baptism. Hell, I was never a fan of baptism to begin with. I never could quite understand how throwing water on yourself was going to save you from anything. However, if dressing in white and getting wet were going to bring me another step closer to finding my daughter, I was prepared to do exactly that.

I'm sorry I digressed. I was really talking about me, Anna and the Rattigan, right? Anyway, I was going to be Anna's chaperone for the evening, mainly because I knew Evan was too much of a prick to take her, and I was guessing that Anna and her friends from school only knew about Rattigan's dance music. Most of them didn't know too much about Rattigan's being gay. So I figured it would just be better if I took her. That way, she wouldn't be so inclined to freak out if she happened to see couples getting it on in the corner. And you know, come to think of it, I don't even know how Anna might react if she were hit on down there. I know I promised to stay on the subject, but

can you dance? What kind of clubs do you frequent? Do you ever even go *out*? Don't get upset, I'm only asking. I just needed to get out of the goddamned house for a change, and maybe even meet someone. Rattigan's was supposed to be just what I needed. You know what else? I still hadn't told Anna about me liking men. Go figure. Anyway this was my first night out in a long-assed time, and I was getting excited. I was willing to bet that the whole entire rest of the family was gonna be in bed by like 9:30 after an exciting game of *Scrabble* or something. Not that there's anything wrong with *Scrabble*, mind you, but it sure in hell wasn't anything like a Saturday night in September on the club scene. I mean, didn't the Bee Gees make a virtual assload from singing about Saturday night? I hate it when you look at me like that. I know you have to at least pretend to be objective, but the expression on your face is giving you away. You're upset with me because I agreed to go to a club with a 17 year-old girl with a fake ID, right? Or maybe you're upset with me because of us sneaking out of the house the night before my supposed baptism? I mean, I really don't know one way or the other, because you never say anything. Do you think when I do things like this it has anything to do with why Jazz and Kira left me? Well, it doesn't hurt to ask. I thought maybe you'd have another perspective on it or something. I have absolutely no problem telling you what happened either, that is, if you still want to know what happened. I know I went off the subject, but we still have time, right?

In complete contrast to Anna, I had absolutely nothing clubworthy to wear, so I had to make do with a white "wifebeater" t-shirt that did almost nothing for my already disturbing body shape plus a pair of old blue jeans. I

started pacing around in my little space because I didn't know what to do with myself. I thought I had already told you this before, but I do not handle pressure or excitement very well at all. Sometimes, even when life is supposed to be fun, I feel dizzy and things begin to distort themselves. My heart practically beats in my throat, and my body soaks of sweat. Then sometimes I even hear those little voices I keep telling you about. I knew Anna and I were just supposed to go out and try to have a good time for a change, but I started to lose it a bit, you know? I used to take Xanax for those kinds of nights, but I didn't have anything like that. So I just did the next best thing to it. I went to the bathroom, found my blade, and began cutting on my left leg. The perspiration from the heat of my now rolled up pant leg began to seep into the cut marks and sting. I applied antiseptics to dull the sensation, and gradually I was feeling better. I was much calmer. I always thought my leg was the best place to cut just before going out because that way no one would notice, and I would get the chance to settle down. Still, I sometimes wonder what life would be like if I did not have to do that all the time in order to relax.

Time moves forward really fast in all other cases except when you are waiting on someone else, it seems. And even though I felt reasonably calm after I cut, I still felt a bit jittery and wanted to do something with myself before Anna showed up. So I began scribbling in my journal again. Never mind about asking me what it said because like I told you before, my journaling and dreams are off limits to you. No offense is intended.

Dear Diary:

It's Saturday evening, and I am ready to go out and have a good time for a change of pace. I have just freshly cut my leg and can still feel the sting. It's nice. The antiseptic makes a unique smelling cologne, and I don't think it will make much of a difference when I sweat in the club, anyway.

Even when we are not in session, I find myself thinking about Virginia. She still is not really speaking to me. I guess that means she is a good listener, but I don't know. I just feel like I want more. I wanted her to say something more to me about my upcoming bogus baptism, for an example. She didn't. I have to wonder what she thinks of me. I sure do think a lot of her. She is beautiful, there is no doubt. I wonder what would happen if I weren't in

here? Would she speak to me? I wonder if she thinks black men are good looking. I know she is good looking to me anyway. I wouldn't have her living here. We would go live on an island in St. Kitt, but that would only be if she would accept Kira as her own. I don't know, maybe not, because Jazz would probably get custody anyway. That still wouldn't ruin things, though. I bet Virginia would look so pretty with the wind in her hair, and I would love to hold hands with her while walking down the beach on a moonlit night. I bet she has pretty feet. I would love to see the sand between her toes. I think white women have the prettiest feet in the whole world. I love feet. For some reason I just love the way they look. They're so sexy, especially with painted toenails-

Just then, I heard tapping on my door. I knew it was Anna. Again, I stashed my journal and blade, and tried to

be casual when I let her in.

“Anna,” I said.

“Saul,” she softly hissed back, “Yeah. Listen, I’m almost ready. You gotta come down to the carport and help me push the car down the street.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

We spent the next few minutes backing Anna’s compact out of the driveway, creeping it far enough down the street so we wouldn’t wake her parents. I hadn’t even thought about Bishop Boyd or Molly coming out to the efficiency to check on me. I used to be more on point with that sort of thing, you know? I’d put pillows under covers and shit and turn the lights out to make it look like I was asleep when I wasn’t. I was a crafty bastard before I came here, I really was.

I could smell myself as soon as I got in the car. A combination of deodorant working overtime and antiseptic mixed with Anna’s wafting perfume. Knowing we made it out okay, we flashed a ‘V’ for victory sign at each other. We’re silly like that. The waxing of the moon shone through on the side of Anna’s face, and, slightly reaching past; it made the entire inside of the car glow just for a second as we started out.

No offense, but when Anna and I were riding to the club, I could feel myself getting the hugest erection ever. I mean, sure, sneaking out was immature as hell to begin with, but the excitement was getting me hot. What else can I say? The adrenaline from that night was electric. And in that moment, I didn’t care that I was a grown man of thirty accompanying a teenager with a fake ID to a gay discotheque. I think I may have just answered my own question as to why Jazz took off with Kira and left me. It’s be-

cause of asinine stunts like that one. That much is a ‘no brainer’, and therein lies the problem. I don’t fucking THINK before I act. Actually, I do think, but I always seem to choose the stupidest option, which makes me that much worse. I guess we should consider this a “breakthrough” for me though, right?

“Is that the new Crystal Method Cd?” I tried yelling over her car stereo.

“Yeah,” she shouted back. It rocks! I had somebody burn it for me!”

As we drove through the night, I decided to roll the car window down. I love the feel of September night air beating against my face. The music from Anna’s stereo shook the car’s insides, and I felt like I was already in a club, while on my way to another one. We soon pulled up to the parking garage. Then we had to circle up a couple of levels before we found a space. Walking toward the night-club, I could already feel the bass of the deep house drums pulsating through my body. I peered over at Anna and caught a glimpse of her silently grinning from ear to ear. I guess she just wanted to savor the moment as much as I did. The music was speaking for itself in the universal language of hedonism.

Anna slipped by the bouncer with no trouble at all. She got her hand stamped, so they knew she couldn’t drink, not that she would anyway, and I didn’t even need to show mine. To them I was just an old codger. Anna paid our cover charges, and once the doors were open, I felt sex, music and heat hitting me all at once. My heart was beating in my chest to the rhythm of the bass drum, and the centers of my palms were wet with perspiration. I felt right at home. This place reminded me of a spot I used to

frequent in Albemarle called Epicurean's', only this was much nicer. I held Anna's hand so we wouldn't lose each other in the sea of bodies. I love going into a new nightspot and just people watching. This joint had a lot going for it, too. I loved the fancy carpeting, and above the stretched bar area, there were these huge plasma video screens. A Seal video was playing on one, gay erotica on another. I craned my neck trying to get a good view of some man's penis onscreen and then moved on. Anna was now barely gripping my hand. She was trying to bust her way through to the patio for a smoke. Gay clubs have the coolest decors. You should have seen the lay out of this joint. Even before we stepped outside, I was able to catch a glimpse of a giant reproduction of Claudio Bravo's *Portrait of Mr. Couchez* hanging on the wall of the exit leading to the patio. Just between you and me, that man, Mr. Couchez, is one of the most beautiful men I have ever laid eyes on. The entire patio floor was done in earth tone bricks with a big Greco-Roman fountain and multi-coloured track lighting at the center of it all. It was a swanky looking spot all right, and it made my old haunt look like a hole-in-the-wall.

“What did I tell you, Saul?” she said while lighting a cigarette. “This is so fucking awesome!”

“Hell, yeah,” I yelled. “Hey, Anna, are you com-fortable here? You know this is a gay club, right?” I wanted to tell her right then and there I like men also, and I was seeing loads of eye candy, but I still wasn't sure how to break the news to a 17-year-old girl brought up in a Mormon family.

“Saul, you know I don't care about that! You're out here with me on my first time. Hey, did you want a drink?”

“What time is it?” I shouted at her.

“It’s a little after one,” she said. “Did you want some money for a drink?” she offered a second time, so I figured I’d better take it.

“Here,” she said, reaching into her purse, “please . . . go get plastered a bit. You haven’t had a drink in how long?”

I took the money, then made my way up to the bar, once again practically bullying my way through an ocean of elbows, yet trying my damnedest to be polite about it. This was no easy task, mind you, while constantly being groped in the process, but on that night, it didn’t matter. I was having a good time. The next thing I know, I was standing next to a hot Latino guy on my left. His cologne and sweat together smelled just like sex. His hard body was so close to me at the bar, I could practically feel him breathing in my ear canal.

“Can I get you something?” I asked him.

“Rum and Coke,” he ordered.

“What’s your name?”

“Marco.”

“Saul.” We shook hands, and right then I wanted to run my fingers through his silky jet-black hair just one time. But instead, I asked him if he wanted to dance or something. I figured I couldn’t just leave Anna standing out there on the patio by herself, so after we got our drinks I coaxed Marco into coming to meet her. I still hadn’t figured out how to tell Anna about me liking men, but you should have seen Marco. He was hot. He was on my mind more than Anna.

“Anna,” I shouted, “look what I found at the bar!” I draped my arm around his shoulder, trying to show Marco I was interested, yet escape Anna’s notice.

“Hi, there!” she shouted and waved while holding her lit cigarette. “How are you tonight?” They shook hands.

“So,” I said to them, “I wanna finish my drink and then can we go back inside.” They agreed, and we went back inside. It was hot as hell.

I don’t know where Anna learned to dance, but she can really move. I was impressed. The flashing strobes made her look extra cool out there. She even got me moving. I got lost in the music as the DJ kindly remembered to play “Situation” by Yazoo. No matter how many years pass, this record will forever be immortal to my ears.

A couple more dance anthems like “The Pool” by Pepper Meshay and then “Lady Marmalade” played. When I saw Marco take his shirt off, I was horny as hell. No way was I taking my shirt off in front of these people, though. I only had one drink for Chrissakes; it was going to take more than that. Once “Man Candy” by Sugar Tank was spinning and nearly bursting everyone’s eardrums, I decided to make my move away from Anna and towards Marco. I knew she could see me over there, but by this point, I was feeling desperate and didn’t really care if she saw me or not, well, at least for the moment anyway. I figured that if I didn’t say something my Latino heat would soon be gone, leaving me cold. It wouldn’t have sucked having one more drink before last call, either, I thought. I knew Anna was paying for everything, and I came with her, but with the mood of the evening, the serious moonlight and Marco’s hot body, could you really blame me for wanting to leave with him? I mean, if you saw him you wouldn’t be looking at me like that.

It wasn’t a minute later that I was once again feeling

Marco brush his wet body up beside me and nudge toward my ears. I could feel him gyrating and grinding against my backside. Then he put his arms around me and spoke up.

“Do you take x?” he offered. “I could half one with you.” This is what I was saying earlier to you about life just interrupting things. I’m Anna’s chaperone tonight, right, but it’s just my luck to run into a hot guy like this, offering me ecstacy. What the hell else was I supposed to do?

“Listen,” I shouted back in his ear, “I want to. That’s my sister over there. She’s in *no way* with *me* the way I wanna be with *you*!”

“It’s almost last call. Can you get us one more?”

“I” gotta stay with her,” I yelled back. “Why don’t you go down and get us one more? Then meet us out on the patio.” He snatched my (actually Anna’s) money and disappeared into the crowd toward the bar area. At this point, I knew I had to say something to Anna, otherwise, things were going to be awkward as hell, and in the worst ways imaginable, too. She simply would not understand my end game at all. I waded through the dance floor masses toward Anna. I pulled her off the disco floor and led her by the hand toward the patio. Once away from the noise and out in the open, I put my hands over both her shoulders, and looked her right in the eyes.

“Anna,” I told her quickly, “Marco’s gonna be back in a second. Listen, you’re going to have to be cool about this, Anna. I like men also. I know I didn’t tell you this before, but I think Marco’s hot, and I kinda was hoping to get somewhere with him tonight, if you know what I mean.”

You’re sitting there and pretending not to judge me,

but I know you are, just from that expression on your face. I know, I know, I picked one helluva time to drop that little tidbit of information, but who knew? I didn't really think I was going to see anybody hot like Marco there. I didn't expect to be offered x either. You have to understand that. You never saw Marco, and I bet you never tried x before, either. Marco returned with the drinks, and Anna was standing there with her arms crossed. She was pissed.

"Listen," she said, "Saul thinks you're pretty sexy, Marco. Why don't I just leave you two alone." she sounded sarcastic as hell. I am so stupid sometimes. I just want to crawl under a rock. Nobody'd know the difference anyway. Marco stood sipping his drink.

"So where do you live, Marco?" Anna asked.

"I live out in North Raleigh. I have my own place. Why?" he asked. "Did you two wanna come out? . . ."

"Well, I just thought if you and Saul were going to hook up you might wanna know he lives all the way over in Duvall..."

"Marco," I interrupted over Anna, "It's really not that far, if you wouldn't mind giving me a lift back home, if we, you know."

"He has to be at church at 9:00 in the morning!" Anna yelled.

"Church?" Marco said, shaking his head.

I just stood there all red-assed. I could not fucking believe her. I told you, I knew I was letting my dick do my thinking for me. I already admitted that, but why'd she have to go and do that? I mean, right in front of him? Right in front of Marco? I was going to get me some of that and she goes and pulls this? You have that look on your face like I was in the wrong, and maybe so, but I thought a

night of hot sex with ecstasy was worth sneaking out. It was “sextacy” for Chrissakes! Nevertheless, I guess everyone has his or her own opinion. Pardon the fuck out of mine.

A few seconds later, after some weird as hell silence, Marco shook his head again.

“I thought you said she was your sister,” he sounded pissed when he said it. “I don’t think I want to drive you all the way to North Raleigh, then bust my ass getting you back to Duvall, just so you can be on time for church. At 9:00 in the morning on a Sunday, I’m still coming down from the ecstasy. But hey, you have a good night anyway, Saul.”

Just that damned fast my entire night at the Rattigan went from sugar to shit. I was pissed. After he walked away, I turned toward her and asked, “What the fuck was that all about?”

“You fucking tell me Saul! I asked you to come out here with me because I was kinda scared to come out by myself, you know? I figured you were a nice guy and that I could trust you! You were gonna leave me and go off and have sex with some guy for God’s sake!! I didn’t even know you were gay in the first place, Saul! I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with that, I just would’ve appreciated it if you’d told me sooner! Plus, I paid for your drink! You got that Marco guy a drink with my money! So you fucking tell me, what the fuck that was!”

Damn . . . For a seventeen-year-old girl, Anna, sure has a lot of spunk. I mean, she was right, but she didn’t have to tell Marco about church like that, did she? I mean, was I completely in the wrong here? I guess I don’t need to tell you that the car ride home was waaay longer going

back. There was nothing but a dead-assed, awkward, uncomfortable silence, no booming music, no conversation, no nothing. I mean, like I said, it went from sugar to shit in the blink of an eye. I guess maybe Marco was only going to be real in my imagination, at least for that night. He was hot though.

Look, you knew this was going to be a long assed story when I started, so why do you have that expression like I've just been sitting here rambling? I can't believe you're actually going to make me wait until the next time to finish this. You know, I find that really fucking inconsiderate. You make me not even want to tell you the rest. I mean, I will but only because I feel I have to. So, can I use the phone to call my ride? We'll pick up again like tomorrow or the next day. Don't let me forget what it was I was telling you.

Session 10

“The Rattigan”

(Part Two, after it’s already much too late to make a long story short)

Listen, I didn’t mean to act so irritated last time when we spoke. It’s just that I feel like you don’t give me enough time; you really don’t. I mean, I know it’s not your fault or anything, but it just seems like once I really get into it, you’re ready to call it quits. It’s as if you do it on purpose, or something, just because you know I’ll talk. I start to feel better about talking to you, and you pretend to make me think I am the one in control but then you have the final say as to when I have to stop talking. See? You have me doing it again, goddamnit! Look, please do not be offended. I’m sorry. I’ll just try to finish what we were talking about from last time.

We got home from the club okay but hadn’t said a word to each other the entire way back, like I was telling you before. You’ll never convince me that cigarettes don’t serve at least some purpose because we both wanted a

smoke. Plus I wanted to apologize to her. You know how it is after a blow up or misunderstanding. Nobody wants to go first, and it's even worse when you're the one in the wrong, you know?

"I'm sorry, Anna. I don't blame you for being upset with me out there. What I did tonight was completely fucked-up." All I could do was hang my head. I was disgusted with myself. I really was.

"I guess I was just feeling so drunk on freedom that I forgot how to act. I hadn't had any fun like that in a long time. I mean, I didn't wanna just ditch you like that, you know." I just stood there like a dumbass, kicking the ground with the heel of my shoe. Anna just shook her head and took another drag off her cigarette.

"Like I was saying, Saul, it was the way you did it that pissed me off. I mean, I thought we were just gonna go have a good time. The drinks were on me... the cover charge." She shrugged her shoulders and then took another cigarette out. I could tell she was really pissed off at me because Anna normally doesn't chain smoke like that. Anyway, she kept on chewing my ass out. I deserved it, though. "Plus, it's like you think I'm stupid or something. You acted like a gay version of Evan tonight, Saul. I mean, I'm seventeen, and the last time I checked, that's not the same as stupid, now is it?"

"You're right Anna. I should've just come right out and told you at the beginning of last week, but I thought it would be like you said, just us going out and hanging, you know? I didn't think I'd meet anybody out there like that."

"Saul, I don't have anything against you being gay. Everybody in that house pretends like that stuff doesn't exist in the world, but I know it does. And, it's not like I

know everything, either. It's just that they think me being seventeen and Mormon, or whatever, means that I don't know about the real world. You could've just told me the truth. I would have understood."

I know I should have been honest with her from the start, but, hell, I didn't think I could exactly break that kind of news to a seventeen year old girl in a Mormon family. She acted like she may have understood, but still, what if she told Evan or Molly? It was bad enough that Bishop Boyd knew already without me waving a rainbow coloured flag and making it public knowledge that I went both ways like that. Now I realize that it was an even worse move to have kept it from her until the last minute like that. It really was horrible, come to think about it. Nevertheless, I have to ask you, how much rope could Anna really give me before I eventually hanged myself.

"Anna," I said again, "you're right. There's no two ways about it. I just didn't know how to tell you about being bisexual, for one, and plus, I know you heard Marco talking about the ecstasy. I just feel like I'm being some kind of bad influence on you. I mean, you barely know me, Anna."

"And yet," she said, "I am still out here with you, Saul." Then she punched me on my shoulder and started laughing at me.

I didn't know how that was supposed to make me feel exactly, but I can tell you it didn't suck too badly. It really doesn't suck when a person puts some kind of faith in you, even if you don't have much faith in yourself. It doesn't suck; it only makes you feel creepy, in a way, especially if you're not used to that sort of thing.

"Okay, you made your point. I'll quit trying to pro-

tect you from stuff and acting like you don't need to know. The truth is I like men, also. That's part of the reason I've been going to those 'appointments.' They want to try and change me so I'll be 'fit' to go on a mission. I've always been like this, though, even before I met Jazz and had Kira. I had a boyfriend named Stuart before I came back to the states, in fact. He was an older, heavy set British guy with silver hair and green eyes. He was a special guy because usually I prefer ethnic looking men with nice bodies like Marco. You really do have to concede Marco was hot because you saw him yourself, Anna. Actually, I'm insanely jealous of men like Marco because I'm so goddamned fat. Anyway, yeah, and I like to get colourful occasionally with some ecstasy or something like that. I like drugs, Anna. I mean, not to the point of being hooked on heroin, or anything hard like that, but sometimes they just help me get to a better place. I feel like I have fucked-up with so many things here lately. I actually wish I could stop smoking these cigarettes, too. You just happened to have them that night."

"Well, Saul, it's not like any of those things are good for you, but I only smoke Nat Sherman cigarettes because pot is harder to come by."

"What?!" She shocked the hell out of me by saying that. She started giggling. I love her giggle.

"Saul, it's not like I'm a huge dope fiend or anything; it's just that I have tried it before, and whenever I did, I liked it. You know how my family is. They're pretty naive about me." You are probably sitting there and not believing me when I tell you this because you would be thinking that no decent Mormon girl could act this worldly, but you have to know Anna. She's different. She really is.

“Hey,” I changed the subject, “did you really think I acted like a gay version of Evan tonight?”

“Yeah, you did, Saul. No offense, but you acted like an immature, effeminate, little bitch.”

Ouch. That really hurt, I have to tell you. I didn’t think I was anything like Evan. That really hit me where it hurt. I wanted to do better by her than Evan, for Chris-sakes.

“Look,” she said, “it’s like five in the morning, and I am getting sleepy out here, but I was just saying I may be young looking to you, Evan, and everybody else, but being young doesn’t make me stupid. If I wanna know about something, I find out about it. I don’t wait for somebody to tell me first. If it doesn’t kill me then I was meant to have that knowledge.”

I guess I don’t have to tell you that Anna actually has more common sense than I do. I’m the one who’s supposed to be like thirty. I act like I’m twelve. However, I wasn’t lying when I told you how cool Anna is, and she was especially cool on that night. Anyway, it was late as hell, and we both knew about church at nine A.M., plus my bullshit baptism after services, so we crushed our cigarettes and went our separate ways, each heading for bed.

“Saul,” she said as she was leaving, “what you did tonight was pretty fucked-up, but calling me your sister was *almost* just as sweet.”

Her words stayed with me for the rest of the night, which had really turned into Sunday morning by this time.

Listen, I don’t want you writing down that it made me cry, what Anna said to me. I’m already embarrassed as hell. I don’t even know why I’m crying. I just am. Would you mind it if I told you about all the wasted baptism bull-

shit on another day? I'd rather just call my ride and see if they'll come pick me up a little early, if that's okay with you. I'm just a little upset right now. We probably didn't have that much time left anyway, right?

Session 11

“Wasted, Early Sunday Morning” (*Angels, Assholes, & Demented Old Circus Monkeys*)

You do not have to tell me the last time I was in here I became emotional . . . what can I say? I was really broken up over what Anna said to me after we got back from the club. I’m in a much better mood, and I can tell you about it today. I just felt like I had to cut it short in order to get myself right again. You don’t look like the type yourself but have you ever gone out the night before and then felt literally like ass the next day? Well if you haven’t, I felt badly enough for the both of us on that early Sunday morning. I felt wasted.

I’m a big guy, in case you haven’t noticed, and normally I can handle my booze fairly well, but it was more about all the other shit combined that made me feel wasted. Plus, like I was telling you about before, this whole baptism thing was a sham. You and I both know that I never did, and still don’t, believe a fucking word of it.

Bishop Boyd had the “gift of discernment” like there’s gold up my ass. Really, did you want to have a look-see? Okay, I know I sound harsh, but remember why I was even doing this, after all. It was supposed to be for my baby. At least that’s what I kept on telling myself all throughout listening to that entire service. I would have rather watched drying paint. Either that, or had my “manberries” subjected to electroshock therapy. Hey, I heard that in some of the older reparative therapies you had gay guys look at porn and then give their genitals a shock every time they got a hard on. Was that ever true? Don’t look at me like that; it’s just something I’m telling you I’ve heard.

Anyway, like I was saying, the service just dragged on, and I wasn’t feeling so hot. The elders kept insisting that I wear this special white get-up so I’d be “pure” for the baptism. I went along with it, just to get it over with, and plus, it was kind of a surreal moment. Not surreal in a Quentin Tarantino sort of way. It was more a “bizarre” type of surreal to see nothing but the Ampersands and a sea of unfamiliar pasty white faces staring back at me like that. Now, you know I mean no offense by saying that, right? I mean, maybe I shouldn’t have even put it *quite* that way because the whole black, white, or other thing really doesn’t mean that much to me. There are angels and assholes in every race, you know? I guess I was just trying to relate to you how I felt.

I mean, suppose you were on the first floor of any building, in any hotel, and you were going to one of your therapist’s conventions or something. Then, say for example, the N.A.A.C.P. was also booked in that same hotel. If by chance, you hit the elevator going “up” because you had to go to the fourth floor, and you ran into a whole group of

black men in the elevator, what would you do? You'll sit here and say it wouldn't matter because you had to get to your convention just like I had to go through with my bogus baptism, but I bet you'd wait for the next elevator to take you "up" instead of boarding that one. Not saying that you don't like black men or whatever. I'm just saying you'd notice a little bit. That's how it was with me on Sunday afternoon. It was just a little different, plus that water was cold as hell.

I'll tell you what made it worse, too, and that was Bishop Boyd's cornering me right after and asking me "things." Yeah, he asked about this therapy too, and I have to tell you, I am glad for the fact that you don't take my "manberries" and shock them, or whatever. That would really hurt if you did. But he did ask me about things, and that's for sure.

"So, Saul, do you feel like a new man now that you have accepted the Lord in your life?" he asked, smiling at me. His grin was always so cheesy.

"Oh yes, Bishop. I have been reading the *Book of Mormon* daily and asking the Lord for guidance. All I had to do was ask Him, and I certainly received. I have a strong testimony now. The church is true."

"We're so proud of you, Saul." Molly came out of nowhere to shake my hand too, for some reason.

"Thanks, thanks so much. I feel like my life is turning for the better now. Through the Lord's help, I can do anything." I was lying my black ass off.

"You can, Saul," Bishop Boyd continued. "Just take comfort in the Lord and remember that even Joseph Smith had his faith tested to measure how much he believed." Then he got really close in my ear after everyone else

walked away from us.

“Remember, Saul, Virginia O’Callah is there to help you with your problems so you can be fit to go on the mission with the younger elders. I think you can be an excellent example for them. Just listen to her. Is she helping you with your ungodly desires?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, lying my ass off again. “She has really helped me to pray harder and to know what the laws of chastity really mean. They’re important. Virginia is helping me out with a lot with my problems. I am coping well.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it, Saul. You just keep on praying, and step by step the Lord will change your heart. The Lord Jesus Christ will literally change who you are. You’ve made a covenant with our Heavenly Father, Saul. Hold fast to it. Read your scriptures. Ask for guidance. Remember, ‘take heed that ye be not deceived.’ Don’t listen to the voice of the Adversary. You were never born a gay, Saul. That goes against Heavenly Father’s plan. The scriptures are crystal clear on that. Anybody who tells you that you were born that way is speaking lies and trying to lead you astray. They will use any excuse, any justification, to break God’s laws. But you must always remember to choose the right, Saul. Choose the right.”

Now do you see what I mean? If what I told you doesn’t make you sick to your stomach, you must like pulling the goddamn wings off flies. I mean, c’mon, ungodly desires? Choose the right? What the fuck does that even mean?

Anyway, things went like that for the whole service and after the baptism, too. He even went on about it all the way through dinner. He just wouldn’t shut up about my

stupid bullshit baptism. You think I'm being ungrateful about all of this, don't you? I bet you think they did me a favor, don't you? I mean, please don't take this as me yelling at you or anything, but you just sitting there never saying a word; it makes me think you're just judging me. I doubt it would kill you to mix in an opinion or two on occasion.

Anyway, getting back to what happened, Anna and I met out by the shed later that night after everyone finally fell asleep. Our little smoking interludes were fast becoming a daily highlight for me, especially if the day had been particularly rotten. I would say you could file my bullshit baptism under the category of rotten. Plus, Anna is the only one in that house that acted like she had any common sense. We were bonding over nightclubs and nicotine, and I liked that.

“Saul,” she said, “I’m allergic to bullshit. What was all that at dinner tonight?”

“Anna,” I started laughing, “you know I had to say all that in front of *them*. You were there at my baptism this afternoon. It was all bullshit.” Just then, I lit up another cigarette. I want to quit, though, I really do. We both sat there, silent for a second, and then she started teasing me again.

“So how does it feel to be Mormon?”

“It feels the exact fucking same way as before.”

“You know, you’ll be a god soon, with your own planet.” Anna is hilarious at times, she really is.

“Yeah, yeah I know,” I said. “I hope that when we talked about the church that night you weren’t *too* upset with me, were you?”

“No way, Saul. It helped me clear up the situation

in my own mind. I don't want to go through life like that, blind and ignorant. I look at my mom and watch how my dad treats her. It's not like he beats her or anything, but it's as if she's second class to him or something, like her whole purpose in life is to serve him and the church through the Relief Society." Then she turned and looked at me, and her voice got soft. "I don't want that kind of life for myself, Saul, and I sure in hell don't want my sister Heidi thinking she has to live like that, either." I agreed with her completely, like I was in the same boat.

"You know I only got baptized today so Boyd would get off my back, right? I mean, you know the deal around here: do the work, get baptized, then go out on that bullshit mission. But yeah, Evan is already taking after his dad. I see how he acts around you. I know he thinks he's being a good, protective brother, but really, he acts condescending as hell towards you. Now I feel ultra bad for acting like such an ass last night at the club."

"Well, yeah, you acted like an asshole, no doubt about it, but past that, I don't need anyone's protection, Saul. What I really need is a big break from this entire family. Seeing this whole baptism thing today made me realize it. They suck. They love me, and I love them, but still, I realize they suck."

"Well," I said, "they are cookie cutter, Anna, and I mean no offense by that, but hey, you heard them reciting that shit in unison before they dunked me in the water. It was spooky." Just then, she started shrieking and howling.

"That one elder looked like a demented, old circus monkey!" I was floored when she said that, you understand. Anna's humor tickles me.

"*A demented, old, circus monkey.*" It was so funny I

nearly pissed my pants.

“Yeah,” she kept on, “one that smells like cabbage!” You just had to be there, I guess, but it was funny when she said that, it really was.

So, I hope I haven’t offended you by telling you about this, but Anna and I really had a good laugh at the church’s expense. Not that they can’t fucking afford it, mind you, I just didn’t want you to think I was like an “anti” Mormon or something. I’m really not. It’s like I was telling Anna before, I just dislike the dogma. Not to get personal, but how do you feel about having endless celestial sex and being eternally pregnant? I don’t really expect you to answer that.

After we finished off our cigarettes, we said our normal goodnights and turned in. Except with me, I couldn’t sleep. For all the bullshitting I did outside with Anna, I still couldn’t shake a weird feeling I was having. I’ve told you about this already, but sometimes, when I am alone with myself, these weird voices start playing in my head, and sometimes, the room even starts to spin. I’m not exaggerating this, either. But why am I telling you this? You really couldn’t have helped me then, and you sure as hell can’t do anything *now*. In fact, since I brought it up just now, I feel ten times worse. All I can tell you is that I cut myself to feel better. Don’t knock it if you haven’t tried it. I don’t mean to be rude, but I think if it’s okay with you, I’d like to spend some time alone. I mean, now I feel fucking miserable when just a minute ago I was in here laughing and joking. I think I’d like to go now. I need to go cut. Please don’t tell the Ampersands that I do this. If you do, I’ll only deny it anyway.

Session 12

“I’m Not Crazy”

(I only do what The Voices tell me)

As badly as I wanted to tell you what happened that night, I couldn’t. It was because I couldn’t remember what the hell I did in the first place. When we left off last time, I just had to leave because I was too embarrassed to continue. There’re a lot of things that embarrass me that I don’t know how to explain to you. I wish it could be easier. I didn’t want to come in here today and start crying again, I swear I didn’t. But that night I was going to tell you about really scared me. It hurts when I cut myself, but it’s the only way I can let out the pain that’s inside. Do you see what I am saying? You probably don’t. What I mean is, I am talking to you right now, but when I am by myself, I start writing in my journal and then I feel sick to my stomach and get dizzy, and things start changing shape. Then sometimes I start crying like I am doing now. Then I hear those voices. It’s those

voices that really bother me. I wish you could help with that. I really wish you could.

The voices sound like my own, except they say really awful sounding things. I do not know any other way to describe them to you. It's not aloud; I can tell they're coming from inside my head. I am not crazy, am I? I don't think I am crazy, but do you? Am I not making sense to you anymore? Are you going to tell the Ampersands about me? Please don't. Please don't tell them about this. I have been doing so well over there, and I don't want any trouble. I only told you about the cutting because you could see my arms. I couldn't hide it from you. From them, I can. I always wear those long sleeves even in hot-assed weather, remember?

Anyway, I was writing all of my personal feelings down in my journal, which again, I don't wish to share, and then it started happening to me again....

"You are a failure as a human being and a living monument to a waste of time, Saul.

Just go ahead and cut yourself, you big pussy!

Yeah Saul, it'll be easier to just do it.

You're a fucking piece of shit nigger, Saul!

You'll feel better as soon as you cut, Saul.

Just go get us a nice, cool, blade. You'll feel better, we promise.

You're nobody fucking special, you fat fuck!

Nobody is paying attention to you! You should have just rotted in jail! You're worthless! There's a

reason why more black men are in jail, than in god-damn college! You're first and only mistake was being born, you fucking idiot nigger!"

There were so many voices saying the same things about me that I couldn't keep up. I tried to answer as best I could.

"I can't keep track of all your fucking opinions. I am going. I am going. Just let me find my blade. It will be over really soon. Okay? I get it; I am that worthless nigger you keep rattling on about. I get it, already, for Chrissakes! If it will make you guys happy, I'll cut myself."

"It's about time you piece of shit faggot! Cut, just go ahead and cut! Happiness is a cool blade, Saul! We're your friends. The sooner you cut, the sooner you can sleep. Hell, you may never have to wake up again! Go on, do it!"

They kept on doing that all night, like real people. It was a crowd of voices. I kept trying to answer them. Do you know what I mean? I was alone, except in my head, I heard real people, as if I had a cutting crew to answer to or something. I am confused even when I try to tell you this, but I'm begging you not to tell Boyd about this. Please. I want to work through this. I don't want to go back to Albemarle. Anyway, I didn't know what to do except cut myself. It's all I know to do. I wish I could tell you more about what happened after that, I really do, but the only thing is, I can't remember. If you look close enough, you can see where I may have cut, but I know it's hard to tell

with my swarthy complexion. I have always thought my skin was too dark for people to see anything else.

I know you can't do anything for me, really, but just don't tell them over there. I already told you why. I want to find my girl, and I feel like this is my only chance to do it. If you think I'm crazy, then let me be crazy, but at least let me try to find Kira. I really do not know what else to say to you, but I wish you could make the voices stop. Could you please tell me how to make them stop? I can't answer to everybody. Listen, I tell you what. If you keep this to yourself, I promise next time I come and see you, I'll feel better. I know I will. Usually, you have to run me out of here, but you wouldn't mind if I cut this short again, would you? I'll just see myself out.

Session 13

“The Saul Shields Gospel Hour”

(Getting high on Jesus)

Listen, I know I have not been well lately, but I appreciate you at least keeping my condition confidential, and strictly to yourself. That is, not going off and telling the Ampersands about me crack-ing up. I told you I’d feel better, and I do. I am back at one hundred percent, in fact. I got that way mainly because of Anna over the last few days. That bullshit baptism had me feeling not so red hot with myself, and you already knew about the rest with me and all of those weird voices. But that Anna, she somehow managed to score some weed from a high school friend, and I have to tell you, it was just what I thought I needed. Look, you have been good in keeping your mouth shut about everything, so here’s another feather to put in your cap. I am a huge ganja hound whenever it is readily available. You look at me like that only because you’ve not likely tried the stuff yourself. Let me

tell you something, I am not a hippie in the true sense of the word, but I firmly believe that ganja came from this earth, and it has many practical and sometimes sacred uses. If nothing else, it gives you an absolutely blissful feeling after partaking of it. You can look at me like that if you want to, but my smoking hippie lettuce is waaay better than cutting myself, don't you think? I think so anyway, and one more thing, weed sure does bring up a lot of strange topics once you become relaxed from smoking it.

“Saul,” Anna said, “you remember what I was telling you the other night after we got back from the club?”

“About what?” I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. I thought she was gonna yell at me some more.

“Well, I managed to score a little bit of the earth’s kindest from a guy at school the other day.” She had a huge shit eating grin on her face, proud as hell of her weed.

“Anna,” I said, “you’d better be careful with that. Put that shit away!” She was holding a little plastic baggie with some of the nicest looking herb you ever saw in it, but I felt paranoid as hell about being caught out there with Anna and the weed.

“Let’s go out back, okay?” She said it like it was just a matter of simple routine.

Do you ever feel like you have two wires that don’t connect in your brain? I mean, I feel like that right now as I am telling you this because I know with your background and training, you could easily just report me. But you know what? Today I am feeling good, and I feel optimistic. I’ll take my chances that maybe you’ll just listen to me, and yeah, you might give me a couple of dirty looks in the mean time, but you’ll still listen to me, anyway.

Anna managed to surprise me once again, but this time it was with her phenomenal reefer rolling skills. She never ceases to amaze me, that Anna. I couldn't roll a joint to save my own life. I really want to learn how, though. I think that could be a useful skill later on. It's practical, it really is. You never know when you may be at a party, and if you're the only one there that knows how to roll, it scores you a lot of respect. It does. Or at least that's what happens at the parties I've been to. The guy who knows how to roll a joint always gets the extra ganja.

“What do you think?” she asked after my first toke.

“I think it's awesome.”

“You feeling anything?”

“Oh man, it's trying to kick in now.”

I don't mean to keep harping on this, but it was some kind-assed weed. You just probably never tried any like that, but if you had, you'd know what I was talking about, I guess.

“Saul.” Her eyes were getting glassy, and her voice cracked.

“What, man?” I was slowly baking, enjoying myself.

“What's the meaning of life?”

Damn. Why'd she have to go and bring that up? I mean, what is it about weed that makes people go and bring that kind of shit up anyway? That kind of talk does nothing but kill a buzz, and I was already killing off brain cells. I didn't need to do both.

“Anna, that kinda shit is waaay too deep for this interaction here, okay, girl?”

“No, c'mon Saul, I'm serious or at least as serious as I can be while I'm getting high.” She started giggling again.

I love her laughter, I really do.

“What do you wanna talk about, Anna?” She was really beginning to harsh my mellow.

“I know the Mormon Church is bogus as hell,” she said, “but what do you think about Jesus in general?”

“Jesus, in what way?” I asked.

“Do you think Jesus is the son of God? Do you take Jesus as a personal savior?”

“Oh, man, Anna,” I said, “girl, you are really fucking with my high here. I don’t want to say something that might upset your faith.” I was serious, too.

“Saul,” she started begging again. “I won’t get upset, I promise.” I hate it when she does that, you know? I mean she flashes those amber eyes at me and then I start feeling sorry for her.

“Jesus was a great guy. All the other bullshit surrounding him, though, is for the birds.” She was smiling, at least until I said *that*.

“What do you mean, Saul?” She had this confused look on her face, and I hated myself for it, but she asked, right? I mean, she could have been inside doing her homework, chatting over the internet, but yet, she had to ask. So naturally I started to give her my answer. What would you have done in my position? Not that you’ll ever answer me anyway, but what the hell else should I have done?

“He needs a demotion, Anna, okay? I mean, all this got started in the *Old Testament* with some bullshit prophecy about a coming Messiah being born of a woman. Well, excuse me, but isn’t everybody born of a woman, or am I missing something here? Then, I don’t know how many hundreds of years later, we get this guy, Jesus, who was

supposedly born of a virgin, which is completely *unnatural*. They make it sound like Mary was impregnated by *aliens*, for Chrissakes. I mean, somebody had to put the bun in the oven to bake the bread, right? Do you have parents? I know I do. I'm a parent myself. Granted, I'm being an awfully irresponsible one at the moment, what with my smoking weed behind a shed and all, but still, I *am* Kira's father. What evidences do I have that the Virgin Birth is true when every other motherfucker who ever walked the face of this planet had parents? What I'm saying is, doesn't the scientific fact that a male agent is required for reproduction matter at all? Or was Jesus just somebody so fucking special that he could contradict and defy known laws of the universe? Did he not supposedly get hungry, tired and tempted? I myself have experienced all those things. He seemed pretty human, if you're asking me."

"Now, Anna?" I kept going, "I'm not trying to sound mean here, but you asked me about this, right." I should have just quit while I was ahead, but in case you hadn't noticed, my eyes are brown, so it naturally follows that I'm full of shit. The weed didn't exactly help, either. "If you wanted to start up a church, what's the first thing you'd say about its leader?"

"I don't know, Saul." Anna's eyes were now nearly bloodshot, and she looked like she wanted to cry, but kept holding back.

"You'd deify them by saying they came into the world in a special way, right? Read up on Buddha, for Chrissakes! This guy Buddha came into the world because of a white elephant touching his mother's stomach with its trunk! Does any one really believe that happened? So what the hell difference is there in *that* compared to a story

about a star that shined so brightly in the sky that moved so slowly that three jackasses were able to follow it until they reached a goddamned manger? Somebody please explain to me the goddamned difference.

“So then of course, Jesus supposedly grows up in a little town called Nazareth, and the Bible records him up until like age twelve , or something, right? Then there’s this big-assed gap until he’s like my age. What happened to the seventeen or eighteen years? I mean, a guy can get up to a lot in that amount of time. How do I know what he was doing in all that time? Where the hell *was* he, anyway?

“On top of all this, most of his supposed miracles were written in after the guy had already been dead for how many years? Now, I am no scholar, and I don’t even play one on television, but how is a posthumous writing really proof of anything? How can I, or why should I even believe something like a man walking on water after the fact? Okay, then you have this whole resurrection thing, right? All the *New Testament Gospels* contain portions which conflict with each other on the details of what supposedly actually happened on Easter morning. Have you ever heard of a guy named Dan Barker, Anna?” She just shook her head “no”, and I knew this was upsetting her but at least I was being honest.

“Well,” I said, “Dan Barker is a former minister turned atheist who has this thing called ‘The Easter Challenge.’ You’re supposed to write a narrative on what happened on Easter morning, using the *Gospels*, plus *Acts*, and a little bit of *First Corinthians*. You’re not supposed to omit *any* Biblical detail, and when you are done, see how much the *Gospels* conflict for yourself. I’m not just making this

up. I really couldn't, even if I tried."I shrugged my shoulders and then took another drag of reefer. Anna just kept on looking at me, and I could tell she was thoroughly disappointed. I felt like I broke her heart. This is exactly why you should never discuss religion when you're getting high. The two just don't mix.

"I didn't know you felt that way about it, Saul. You sound pissed off at Jesus or something. What'd he ever do to you?"

"Anna, as I said before, it's nothing against the *man* and his ideas. It's just religious establishments trying to make him something he's not. I mean, how do we even know for absolute fact that he even said all those things attributed to him in the first place? The *Gospels* were written by anonymous authors. It's not as if Jesus discovered the Theory of Relativity, created a vaccine, wrote a single book, eliminated poverty or freed a single slave. He said, 'Ye will have the poor with you always,' and he stood in the very midst of slavery and did nothing. You ever read *Luke*, 12:47? You need to look that shit up if you ever get a chance. So when you ask me if I take him as a personal savior, I have to ask, from *what* did he save us?

Even if Jesus actually said and meant every single word recorded in the *Bible* that still doesn't make them true. I mean, no offense, Anna, but if someone told you that they would 'return quickly,' and your dumb ass was still waiting like 2,000 years later, wouldn't you at least either check your watch, or maybe wake up to the realization that the person wasn't going to come back at all? I guess when Jesus soared up through the clouds he must have gotten himself caught in the Van Allen belt or something. I could be wrong, but if Jesus supposedly *did* die for

our sins, he certainly didn't do a good job. He's no bigger than history to me, Anna, he really isn't. The world is still here 2,000 years later, and what's really changed? Nothing. Not to get too deep on you, Anna, but I feel people in general, and especially *my* people have been blinded by fairy tales, ignorance and superstition long enough. The last thing anybody needs is to hear that they're born a sinner. I mean, that's like me picking up my baby girl and telling her everyday she's no good. And that can't be good for anybody. What the hell kind of message does that send?"

"Then what *did* Jesus die for, Saul?" Her lips were trembling, and her face contorted into the weirdest shape.

"The hell if I know Anna. Maybe it's because he wouldn't shut up about claiming to be God, so the Romans executed him via the Jews, who already thought he was a failure anyway. Just don't try to tell me he died to save *me* because he couldn't even save *himself*. For damn certain he didn't die *willingly*, not if he was screaming 'Oh Lord my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' To me, that sounds like nothing more than an ordinary man afraid to die. And you know what? He's dead and gone and its safe to say that after 2,000 years he isn't coming back either, Anna. I'm sorry."

I know you may be offended that I said these things to her like that, what with your religious background and all, but she asked me. I guess I just don't see the point in pretending any more. I want to move off the spiritual plantation, if spirituality even exists at all. I'm no longer interested in being dependent on outside things like 'Jesus' or the 'Bible' as if they're some sort of magic answer to all of my problems. Hell, I'm jealous I didn't come up with the 'Bible' idea myself. You take a set of books that have been

revised and edited since 200 A.D., and you create a multi-billion dollar empire from it. Don't look at me like that, it's true. Do you know how many goddamned Bibles are sold each year? It's the number one selling book in the world. Simple-minded people, in my opinion, want and expect you to believe that 'Jesus' and the 'Bible' have all the answers. But no other man can solve your problems for you. Even as fucked up as I am, at least I recognize that much. I mean, what do you think is more powerful, some book like *The Purpose Driven Life* or the man who already has a purpose in the first damn place? Did anyone ever ask that guy on the lam that shot the courtroom judge about his purpose before he ruined up his life? But sure enough, it sold more books and made one woman at least ten thousand dollars richer, right? So where's that guy, now? Death row, probably for sure. It's his own fault, I know, and who am I to judge, anyway, but I just think it's bullshit to make it seem like it mattered what that woman was reading to him just before she called the police on his ass, and he was captured. I mean, how many options did this guy have after he had the entire world looking for him on a manhunt? But what the hell do I know? Maybe she did the guy a favor. All I know is that if I ever go on the lam, I'm not going to some lady's house and have her read me anything.

Now that was one hell of a digression, wasn't it? I apologize for that, but you know me, I go from one thing to another. Anyway, Anna and I finished off our weed, which, by the way was sublime, if I hadn't already mentioned that to you.

"Saul, I guess I just never thought I'd hear you say those kinds of things about Jesus." She was hurt. I was hurt too.

“Anna,” I said back, “you know I wouldn’t say those things to hurt you.” My eyes started burning up. “I guess I didn’t know my opinions would come out like that.” She was the one who brought it up, but I still felt bad. I never wanted to upset her. I really didn’t.

I should have just left it alone, but I couldn’t. I feel sad even talking about it to you now. After all, Anna was nice enough to share her stash with me in the first place. Why did I have to take the conversation to such a dark place? I don’t really know, except to say that, maybe because there is so much darkness in my own soul. Or is that darkness just simply the absence of light?

Nothing else that went on that night, once we polished off the weed; we just ended up calling it a night. I went to bed feeling like a piece of shit. I mean, it was a damned shame, too, because it was the emotional waste of a perfectly good-assed high that I could have had. But instead, I just crashed out on my cot and fell the hell asleep. I don’t remember anything else that happened either, to tell you the truth. I am sure at some point I must have dreamt, but like I said before, even if I could recall anything, I’d still have to keep it personal. Listen, I know that our time is up, but thanks for listening to me today. And don’t take offense about my need to keep my stuff private. I think if you knew about it, you’d be bored to tears. My ride is here so I have to go. Thanks.

(Out Of) Session 14

“Saul’s Second Vision”

*On the Road to Damascus
(The Dispensation, & Last Goodbye)*

I was finally achieving a peaceful night’s rest for once without cutting myself when it began happening again. This time I found myself seated at a long white table. I was on one end with Virginia O’Callah seated at the other. This time I was not nearly as consumed with fear as I was during our first spiritual encounter. In fact, when I saw her beautiful countenance from that table length’s distance, my heart welcomed her presence. I was ever so glad to see her, or so I thought..

“Saul,” she spoke sweetly.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Are you thirsty at all? Would you like a tall, cool glass of water?”

“Yes, please.” Suddenly she was standing above me holding a golden pitcher of water and calmly pouring it into my glass. She deliberately continued pouring, pouring

and pouring. even though she could see my glass filled to the brim, Virginia just continued to pour, pour and pour. I was getting wet and well on my way to becoming soaked.

“Whoa,” I said, “are you trying to get me a drink, or give me a bath?”

“I did this to show to you that you’re already so full of so-called facts and opinions that your mind has room for nothing else, Saul. Nothing else can get in, nothing. You think you know everything, yet you ask me to pour you a glass of water. For what purpose? What is the point in me pouring you a glass of water if your glass is already full?” I was stunned, still seated at the table and soaking wet; I didn’t have an answer for her.

“Let me show you something else.” Just then, seemingly out of thin air, there before me was a banana which rested on a golden plate.

“Okay?” I asked. I was confused.

“Peel it,” she commanded softly. I shrugged my shoulders and picked up the banana carefully peeling it down each side, leaving the skin on the plate.

“Can I eat it?” I said trying to be funny but actually wanting to eat the banana.

“Go ahead,” she granted, “but may I show you something while you’re eating.” In the blink of an eye, another banana appeared, again out of thin air, and Virginia held it up for me to notice.

“Watch this,” she instructed. Holding the banana within her delicate yet firm grip, she took the banana, flipped it upside down, and in one fell swoop extracted the banana from the skin.

“Which way do you think was easier, Saul?” She

looked at me while eating her piece of fruit. I didn't want to admit it but clearly, inverting the banana and peeling it from the base was easier.

“Okay, your way was. Why?”

“Saul, do you think it's possible that if you could be wrong about something as simple as the fastest way to peel a banana that there are other things you could be wrong about?” She sat silently, but it was almost as if she knew what I was thinking; she just wanted me to say it aloud.

“Okay, yeah, Virginia, there are things that I could be wrong about,” I conceded. “So what does that mean?”

“It means that you need to open your mind, Saul. It means you need to open your heart. I thought we went over this the last time I visited,” she counseled. “I was trying to get you to see that things are not always as they appear.” Then, once again, as if the sheer absurdity of two pieces of fruit appearing out of thin air wasn't enough, Virginia now held before me a mirror with a golden frame.

“Saul, what do you see when you look into this glass?” she asked innocently. The second she handed it to me I was expecting to see what I always see, a round face with a dark complexion and two piercing black eyes with maybe a partial view of my braids. But instead, I looked and saw nothing. Absolutely nothing. I saw no reflection there.

“What the fuck?” I asked angrily.

“What is it?” she asked, with a sly grin.

“I don't see myself in this stupid mirror.” I was now being indignant; I wanted answers.

“That's what I have been trying to tell you all along, Saul. There is no real 'me' or real 'I'. You made that up a

long time ago. Somebody told you what the colour of your skin was, for instance, and all you have done all your life is buy into it, hook, line and sinker. What's your favourite colour, Saul?"

"It's grey, and so what?" I replied.

"Look into the mirror again." I was actually afraid to, but I complied anyway. This time I saw what appeared to be my face completely coloured as grey. It was odd, to say the least. I had never seen my eyes this way, or my hair, and as it was grey, I didn't like it so much. It made me look old. So, on a whim, I decided to imagine pink. Guess what I got? Yeah, a pink complexion. Shocking pink locks, the whole gambit. After a couple more trials with various hues, something in me began to see Virginia's point. Either that or the weed I smoked with Anna last night contained a few hallucinogens.

"So, I see that I can be anybody I want to be, Virginia. I have never experienced anything like that before. So what the hell does it mean?"

"Well for one, to be honest, your thoughts really *are* what shape your perception of reality and also your experiences. Your 21 grams of soul, which are on loan from God's Universal Bank of Consciousness, supply your thoughts, remember? I have to also say that I am a little disappointed in your views on Jesus, Saul."

"Anna asked me about that herself!" I protested.

"Saul, you said those things out of spite. You've allowed yourself to be hurt and wounded by all of your own choices, and now, you feel you have to lash out at somebody. So you choose someone who hasn't occupied this planet for 2,000 years. He's an easy target. You're hurt so you figure it's easy to slam Jesus, right? I mean, Saul,

c'mon, you're choking on the poison of your own hateful words. A million pounds of hatred weighs nothing compared to an ounce of love, Saul. While it is true that religiosity does kill spirituality, *true Christianity* was Jesus' gift to humanity. Out of Christianity came the first schools, hospitals and welfare systems to help the poor. You don't really mean those things you said about Jesus. You said them because you're hurting. You said them because you're angry. You said them because deep down inside you're feeling dark, miserable and lonely. Your soul is famished. Have I taught you nothing about God? God is not some big, white-bearded guy in the sky judging you, Saul. Jesus tried to tell people that, but some people even mistook him for *God*. I can't speak for him today, but I'm sure that's not what he wanted. Jesus had *ideas*, Saul. He was ahead of his time in many ways. You can't blame *him* because of slavery, sickness and wars. He didn't start them, and he surely wasn't going to end them. It wasn't his purpose. He was only one man, after all. Have you not heard of idealism? I know that deep down inside, you have ideals, Saul. Once you have silenced that overworked human mind of yours, just for once try listening to your spiritual connection, your intuition, your inner voice. You think you can hide behind your so-called intellect, Saul, but you can't. You'll never outrun your own shadow. You and your spiritual self are INEXTRICABLE, Saul. I want you to look at something here, and tell me again what you see."

Damn. I was getting tired of being proved wrong by this woman and wished this dream would end, but for the moment at least, I was there to listen, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Out of her robe, Virginia pulled a large Tarot card. It

was the number eight, from the Major Arcana, indicating 'Strength'. I had seen this card before in waking life when I used to dabble in doing readings with friends, but this time, the card appeared differently. It was in full colour depicting a woman, resembling Virginia herself. She was wearing a ring of white roses shaped like a tiara, and she was leaning over to pet something. It was a black beast, specifically a black bull. As I studied the card carefully, it was indeed a *bull*, only it was *my* face being depicted. I couldn't understand.

"Saul, what this card is trying to illustrate is that spirituality is strength, not weakness. You're afraid that if you allow your spiritual side to show, your intellectual side will disappear, but that just isn't the case. You focus too much on the external and not enough on the internal. Within yourself, you have everything you need. With strength of spirit you can overcome any challenge you face. Mental activity is what influences material appearances and conditions. That's why a small woman like me can fearlessly reach out and pet a bull. It's all based on spiritual strength, Saul, mind over matter."

"Is that why you just sit there when we talk, Virginia?" I had to ask because I'd been dying to know the answer.

"Well, partly, yes," she answered with a grin. "A soft answer turneth away wrath, Saul. I know what's in your heart. I also know you try to put up a big intellectual front to cover the pain inside. You miss Kira, for example. You feel like your life is a mess. You're afraid that I cannot or will not see you as a unique human being regardless of the colour of your skin. Like it's somehow wrong to be part of a bigger collective. However, please remember that the

entire universe really is just One Big Spiritual System. The system works through you and your own thinking. God doesn't care who you are; Cause and Effect go hand in hand and are always working in a continuous cycle. It's what makes the world go round." I sat motionless still trying to take this all in, while she continued.

"Oh, and one more thing about Jesus, Buddha or anyone else," she said, as we both rose from the table. "You can never deny another's divinity while affirming your own. Our time is up, and I have to go now." In the next moment, Virginia once again somehow transformed herself back into the very same warm, wonderful woman that I had been yelling at during my sessions. When we touched, though, I immediately felt the warmth of her spirit embracing my own.

"I love you, Virginia." I don't even know why I said that, but I did. Maybe because it was true.

"Take care of yourself, Saul."

Then, the entire scene vanished. I woke up in the same tiny cot, drenched in perspiration, with tingling limbs from sleeping so awkwardly. That was some kind weed; it really was. Virginia really gave me something to think about, and she didn't even know about it in waking life. That Virginia is out of this world; she truly is.

Session 15

“One Thing Leads to Another”

(Sex Crimes, Why I Hate Cops, and My 16th Apology)

It is not as if I go out of my way to show them my black ass, but I do not mind telling you that I do not like police officers very much. I have distaste for their entirely corrupted system of injustice. You probably like them and would date a guy like that, but I'm just not a fan. I'm sorry. Just to give you a “for instance:” it always seemed to me, at least while I was driving, that if they really cared about safety, cops wouldn't hide in bushes with radar guns. It's dishonest. It's kind of like me going out to the woods with a huge semi-automatic and blasting a deer or something. Not very sporting of me, is it? Another reason I don't particularly like them is the way they hassle people for no apparent reason. While in my case it's not entirely without cause, you still get my meaning. “Officer Friendly” wasn't ever, and will probably never be, a friend to me, not even for a dozen Krispy Kremes.

Anyway, Anna and I were out behind my shed smoking weed again when we started talking about food and the munchies. If you ever decide to smoke a little, you'll get them too. Everything tastes a little better on weed, even when it's not good in the first place. That's partly how I got so fat.

"Anna, I really am sorry about the other night when I was bumming about Jesus like that."

"Saul," she said, "that was a real buzz killer. It made me want to go out and kill fluffy bunnies. All I did was ask you a simple question, and you took it over the top. Next time warn me."

Then she started laughing. I love it when Anna laughs; it makes me feel good.

"Listen," I said, "your folks are inside sleeping, right?"

"Yeah."

"I want to play some Steve Miller." Steve Miller is great music to listen to while getting high and relaxing.

"Anna," my eyes were beet red and my voice was cracking from the smoke. "*Here's a story, about Billy Jo, and Bobby Sue . . .*" She started to chuckle, then she joined in on the words.

"Sitting round the house, getting high and watching the tube . . ." We're silly, but we have a good time together, we really do.

"Saul, I'm hungry as hell."

"Well, why not just go in and fix a sandwich or something, Anna?"

"Because," she said slowly, "I want some nachos from 7-11, the one up the fucking *roooaadd*." Then, she started giggling her ass off. She was high. She was high

and had the munchies. Anna was so cute. I started laughing too. I almost wet my pants.

“Seriously,” I said with my speech all slurred, “jus’ go in and get us something t’ eat.”

“Dude,” she insisted, “I really want some sloppy-assed Nachos. Why can’t we go get em?” she asked.

“Cos, Anna,” I started giggling again, and nothing was even funny at the time, “I don’t feel like going anywhere. I feel like jus’ goin’ t’ sleep.”

“Forrrrget you then, Saul,” she slurred with her bleary red eyes. “I’ll just go myself.”

“Anna, p-p-p-please don’t jus’ go out there with the car.”

“It’s only up the *roaaadd*, Saul. I can drive there if I want to.”

“Okay, Anna, wait. C’mon, let’s jus’ go walk, er let’s jus’ go for a walk up there, maaan. It’s not that far..... really.” I was fucking toasted, I tell you, toasted. But at least I had the good sense to keep us from driving.

“Oh, Saul that’s so sweet of you. You’re gonna walk me up to the store?”

I didn’t know if it was sweet or not, but I sure in hell didn’t want Anna trying to drive away in that kind of condition. She was fried, deeply fried.

“Man, Anna, I don’t know why you’d want some nasty assed Nachos from 7-11 of all places. You really should be in doing your homework, ‘er; I should be in sleeping so I can do my work, ‘er something.” We both just died laughing, stumbling, trying to get up and find our direction. We were both pretty far out there. Eventually we found the pathway leading up to the store, but we practically had to prop each other up every step of the way. I

had the burden of Anna's weight mostly, and I kept my arm around her waist, staggering along.

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" she kept asking me.

"No, Anna, don't make me turn this car around." My sense of humor is world class, you must admit.

When the all too familiar glow of the white, green, red and huge "7" began coming into view, I also caught a case of the "munchies." My stomach was rumbling louder than hell.

"Now I want some Nachos too," I slurred. We both kept on stumbling along, laughing the whole way.

Now, for as fucked-up as we both were, I still have to tell you that I hadn't forgotten Anna and I were in the Duvall area, and I'm not just some dumb ass. Walking down certain streets, even with a young white girl, was no guarantee that the police wouldn't stop and molest me for some reason or another. You can call it a self-fulfilling prophecy if you want to, but sure enough, I was right. Because just as sure as I'm sitting here, Anna and I saw a police car emerging from around the corner, and it was fast approaching us. It didn't make a lick of goddamned sense, why he stopped us.

"Anna," I yelled, "straighten up! Straighten the fuck up! There's a cop car, Anna! Act right! Stand up straight and keep on walking naturally." I didn't mean to sound harsh to her, but I knew I wasn't supposed to be out after 9 pm, anyway, and I knew it was much worse that I was stoned out of my gourd. The ganja sometimes gives way to feelings of paranoia. It wasn't helping matters that I was out with a minor, either. The car came down the street flashing its blues like a strobe, and I could feel Anna get-

ting stiff and becoming almost frightened. I held her hand, trying to make her feel secure. We were stoned, but the rule is, when a cop enters the picture you somehow find a way to straighten up quick. For some reason we must have looked suspicious to the officer because even as we tried to walk past, the officer slowed down and approached us.

Shit. I hate police officers for exactly the same reasons I was telling you about earlier. The 'BTK Killer' manages to elude these idiots for over twenty years, but yet, they're right on top of things when they see someone like me walking down the street at night. Go fucking figure.

"Hi, how you guys doing tonight? It's a little late to be out isn't it? Where you headed?"

"Hi there," I said quickly. "We're just going to the store." We tried to keep walking, but that cop insisted on being an asshole. I knew Anna was scared, but I tried to be strong enough for the both of us. It was hard with some prick flashing lights in your face though. It really was.

He motioned toward Anna, and then pointed at me. "Do you know him?" What an idiot this guy was.

"Yeah, I know him," she answered.

"Okay, do either of you have an ID I can get hold of, please?"

"Are we under arrest or something?" Anna blurted out. I could have shit a brick when she said that.

"Well, ma'am technically you *are*. I just need an ID and you can move along, go to the store or whatever. In this area you're not supposed to be out past this hour if you're under 18. There's a curfew."

"I'm on my period, officer and I've run out of pads. My friend here was just nice enough to walk me to the store because he didn't want me going out by myself at this

hour. I didn't want to drive because the store's only up the road anyway. Can we go now? Because I'm starting to bleed inside my pants and I'm really uncomfortable." You would've thought somebody kicked that asshole bastard cop square in the balls because he didn't seem to know what to say.

"L-Look," he stammered, "just go ahead, do what you have to do, and if I see you up here again, I'm going to get an ID on both of you. We're patrolling the area."

Now, had I been by myself, that asshole officer would have insisted on checking an ID of some sort. But old Anna had some quick wits about her. Instead, the dumbass just climbed into his car and left. I guess he didn't want to see any "senseless bloodshed." Feel free to laugh at any time. You have to admit that was quick of me.

"Anna," I said, "that was fucking brilliant. How did you think of that so fast? You caught his dumb ass completely off guard!"

"I just got lucky. I didn't expect him to let us slide with not showing any ID. I had left mine at home, and it was all I could think of to say."

"Well, anyway," I said as I opened the door to the store, "let's just get our munchies and get on back home." We didn't see any other cops on the way back, and we were both glad of that. The food we ate would have been horrible under any other circumstance except this one. We once again got relaxed, and our appetites came roaring back. In case you didn't know, you can put away massive amounts of food when you're stoned.

"Anna, I almost shit a brick when that cop asked us for an ID."

"Well, he's gone Saul, and actually, the food is al-

most gone too, now.” For a second, we just sat there together in my shed, not saying a word to each other.

“Well, Anna that was enough excitement for me tonight. I am ready to crash.”

“Saul, I am too, but please do me a favor, first? I’m not trying to be funny, but could you just rub my shoulder for a minute before I leave? It’s sore for some reason.”

“Yeah, come over here,” I said quickly.

I just got up in my cot and started to give her a massage. I didn’t think much of it, either. It was just like rubbing my sister’s shoulders or something, if I had a sister. I began rubbing and kneading still some more, but for some reason, my feelings about her being my sister began changing. I wasn’t seeing her like that anymore. Her shoulders, in fact, were beginning to feel soft to my touch, and as I continued rubbing, she even started to moan softly.

Now, I already know what you’re thinking and what you must be feeling. I have to be honest with you, I was thinking the same thing, and I bet I was feeling what you’re feeling right now as you’re hearing me tell this to you. I didn’t use to be this despicable of a character. There was a time in my life when I had morals, virtue and character. I don’t know what happened to that man, but he was now long gone.

“Does that feel good, Anna?”

“Yeah, it really does. I’m getting wiped out here.”

“How does this feel if I rub your back?” I asked while my fingers crept under her t-shirt.

“Good, Saul.”

“Anna, if you want I’ll rub your feet too. Take off your shoes.”

“My shoes?”

“I wanna rub your feet. I’ll rub them for you if you want me to.”

“Okay, I think that will feel good.” She removed her shoes and socks, and I got to see her beautiful soft, bare feet, up close and personal for the first time ever. I love looking at women’s feet, in case I never told you that before.

“Anna,” I asked, “are your feet ticklish?”

“Yes, please don’t. I can’t handle that.” That was all I needed to hear to begin tickling her soft soles, and I knew they were going to be extra sensitive because of the walk we took together. She laughed almost uncontrollably, to the point of begging me to stop. No offense to you, but she was starting to turn me on.

“Okay, is that enough?” I teased.

“Yes,” she panted. I watched her chest give a few more shallow heaves from the laughter I caused, and at that point, I could no longer resist the urge to move close enough to kiss her. She didn’t resist me. This was so wrong. Why was I doing this? Why wasn’t my brain stopping me? Clearly, I was thinking with the wrong head. Where was my sense of decency? How could I take advantage of a friend like this? If I kept doing this, I could be sent back to Albemarle. What would Jazz and Kira think if they saw me doing this? We kept on kissing, and I pulled our bodies closer. I then began running my fingers through her hair. She looked into my eyes, pausing to think.

“Saul, wait a second,” she hesitated.

“C’mon Anna, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you at all.”

“Saul, I’ve never done this before.”

“It’s okay, Anna. There’s a first time for everybody.”

“I don’t want it to hurt. I always thought I’d be married. I didn’t know you felt this way about me. I trust you Saul, but should we even be doing this?”

“We’ve gotten pretty close since I came over here. I don’t think I’m ready to marry anyone, since I’m not even technically divorced, but I don’t wanna think right now. Let’s just take another hit, relax and get comfortable. Do you want me to do something for you down there?” I slowly spread my hand over her crotch.

“What?”

“You know, what I mean. I want to get you excited. I want to make you feel good. Let me lock the door.” I quickly locked the door and came closer to her.

“You’re not really on your period, are you, sweetheart?”

“No,” she answered nervously.

“Good. Take off your clothes, okay?”

“Saul.”

“C’mon, Anna, it’s okay. Take another hit of weed. It’ll relax you.” I should have just let her leave, only I didn’t want to. It didn’t matter to me what she wanted as long as I didn’t rape her because something in me had changed. If I could have stopped, I would have. And it’s like I was telling you before, sometimes things distort themselves, and I lose track of what I’m doing. You’re not me, so you’ll never see what I see, you’ll never hear what I hear. My head hurts just from remembering what I heard that night.

“GO AHEAD AND FUCK HER SAUL!
JUST DO IT! GET IT OVER
WITH! WHAT’S THE MATTER

WITH YOU? YOU'RE A NIGGER,
SAUL, DON'T BLOW YOUR
CHANCE TO GET SOME NICE,
TIGHT, WHITE PUSSY! C'MON,
DO IT! DO IT!"

Anna took another hit, took off her clothes, and soon we were both nakedly cramped in my small space.

"Lie down," I told her.

I was careful to treat her soft, virgin body with kid gloves, and I caressed where I saw fit to caress, and I kissed her in the same way. I was gentle. Her body was ready, and her body responded to mine. I promise you that no matter what you may be sitting there thinking of me right now, I swear to you, I was gentle. I held her in my arms for a few moments afterward and then we both decided on a smoke, so we put our clothes back on and headed out toward the back of my shed.

"I pictured my first time differently, Saul."

"Well, Anna, I guess everybody I know has."

"Is that all you can say?" Her voice rose.

I shrugged my shoulders, "I mean, I know how you feel, more than you know, Anna." I hate myself for telling you that I did something like this. It's okay if you judge me because there's nothing you can say to me that I haven't already told myself. I felt like an animal. Things were never going to be the same again between Anna and me. I knew it. You know Anna is a minor so, if you're sick of me, you can always call and report me. Is my sex crime any worse because it was with the Bishop's daughter of all people? Well, I think he had something like this coming to

him. Why don't you add "sex offender" to your little dossier on me? Do you hate me now? Have I finally crossed the line? I should know by now that you're never going to say anything to me, but I didn't see the harm in asking anyway. Who the hell am I kidding? YOU HATE ME; YOU FUCKING HATE ME ! I know you do because I would fucking hate me after what I did to Anna! I don't mean to start crying on you again, but I can't help it. I don't have control over this shit anymore. Why couldn't you have been there before I fucked her? Why not? Why the FUCK not? I NEEDED somebody to be my conscience because I don't have one any more! I thought I liked Anna, but I didn't care about her at all. She was the only one over there that gave a damn about me. I hurt her, GODDAMNIT, I HURT HER! I HATE MYSELF! I FUCKING HATE MYSELF! I CAN'T STAND IT! I CAN'T STAND TELLING YOU THIS! I CAN'T STAND HER CRYING, AND I CAN STILL HEAR HER YELLING AT ME! HER VOICE IS FOLLOWING ME EVERY-FUCKING WHERE! I CAN'T MAKE IT STOP! PLEASE MAKE IT STOP GODDAMNIT! MAKE IT STOP! YOU'RE A GODDAMNED THERAPIST, DO SOMETHING!

"Saul," Anna, started crying, "I can't believe that you'd do something like that and not have more to say to me."

"Anna, I wish I knew what to say. I'm confused."

"Confused about what, Saul?" She was turning angry.

"You're a fucking asshole, Saul! How can you act like that! I hate you. I fucking hate you! I'm TELLING MY FATHER YOU FUCKING RAPED ME YOU WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT NIGGER! YOU GODDAMNED SON

OF A BITCH! I HOPE YOU GO BACK TO ALBEMARLE FOR THE REST OF YOUR FUCKING LIFE! AFTER THAT I HOPE YOU ROT IN HELL!"

Yeah, I really appreciated how she added the "nigger" blast on the end, there. It was a nice touch. For some reason when she said that I felt like either Emmett Till or Kobe Bryant minus all that goddamned money. I couldn't figure out which.

Anyway, that brings us to HERE. Yeah, that's right, you and me. Everything I needed to take with me is in the bag you saw me bring in HERE. I'm leaving to find my daughter as soon as I walk out that door. You didn't really think I was going to stick around at the Ampersands so Bishop Boyd could call the police on me, did you? They don't even know I'm HERE. It wasn't the smartest thing to do, but I'm HERE because I want you to run away with me to St. Kitt. Don't sit there and pretend you never noticed me looking at you, beautiful as you are. I love your eyes. You know together we're "Black Bull and Hazel Fish." I'd be "Black Bull", if you hadn't guessed. You'd be "Hazel Fish" because of your eyes, and because you once gave me fish in a dream.

Do you mind if I call you by your name, Virginia? Because you know, I never did do that much. I sat and yelled a lot, but I never really took the time to be more cordial! I'm sorry about that too, by the way, so kindly accept my sincerest, humblest, sixteenth fucking apology. Any-way, I'm sure that as you get to know me, you'll find that I'm really a nice person, Virginia. Now, you're sitting there, and looking all worried for no reason. I haven't got a gun or anything on me. I didn't come for that. I came to take you away from all this. Surely, you had to have at least

some idea that I was writing about you in my journals, right? C'mon, don't blush, baby. I thought you were the most beautiful star fallen from the sky the moment I laid eyes on you. I wish you'd relax. I'm not going to hurt you, I promise.

You know, you appeared to me in visions, Virginia. You came to me as an angel. Hell, you came to me as a fucking goddess! I can see how people would want to get down on their knees and just worship you, lovely as you are. I never wanted to tell you before because I was too embarrassed but not anymore, no, not anymore. I can honestly say I'm not afraid to say "I love you." Not in that sick, sad, twisted, demented sort of way that you see in bad movies or read about in second-rate novels. I love you simply because you exist, not for what you will or will not give me. I'm not a fucking serial killer; I'm not a rapist, and hell, I'm not even prone to violence against anyone except myself. I would just venture to say that I might be a little unwell. I still have a little issue with cutting on myself when things don't go my way. I guess maybe short-term reparative therapy wasn't the answer after all. But you tried to help me sweetheart, and even though you fell short, I still love you for it. STOP REACHING FOR THE GOD-DAMNED PHONE! I'M NOT THROUGH TALKING YET, GODDAMNIT!

Anyway, now that I know what real love is, Virginia, what would it take for you to come with me, honey? I don't have a lot of money on me, but I promise I'm good for it if you can get us back to Virginia so I can find my baby girl. I hate Jazz for what she's done to me. Oh, let me rephrase that. I meant to say, "I'm only a victim, if I choose to be one." Isn't that healthier?

Don't you like warm weather? St. Kitt is beautiful all year round. The sea is blue, the sand is white, and I would love to walk with you hand in hand on the beach. Does that sound good? It doesn't? I guess I can tell it doesn't because of the way you're looking at me. I have been watching all of your different expressions the entire time throughout our sessions. I know when you're upset, believe me, I do. What's wrong? Does psychoanalysis make you feel uncomfortable, too? Why do you suppose you feel that way?

I know as you sit there looking into my eyes, you think you're 'one up' on me, don't you? I know you do. Do you really think you're any different than me just because you're sitting in that special chair? Do you actually think that because you sit in another chair you're suddenly immune to human feelings? I imagine you think it's safer in that chair, don't you? If I were a violent man, which I'm not, my fist would be colliding with that goddamned chair right now. You're not immune, Virginia. I know you like to think so though, right? That way, you can sit there, and never have to feel attached to a single patient, once the treatment is over. You can just end it and send them on their way, right? Instead of acknowledging my feelings, you'd rather disassociate with them all together. You'd rather change the subject when I'm talking to you about real things, like my feelings for you. I don't know what would be worse, Virginia, not having a conscience, like me, or not having feelings? Oh, wait a minute, might they somehow be connected? What was that five-dollar word you used on me? I think it was "INEXTRICABLE." Yes, that was it. Well, baby, I feel a connection with you. Excuse the fuck out of me for caring and being so simple-mindedly human. It's a character flaw.

I'm sure you'd have me believe that it's your ethics that preclude you from caring anything about me beyond this office. Please, I'd rather be hated than pitied. You don't have to lie to me, Virginia. How ethical is it to ignore me when I tell you "I love you," for Chrissakes! I'm not asking you to reciprocate my feelings. I just want you to respond to me. Is that asking too much? You know, speaking of ethics, would your ethics stop on the side of the road and help me if I were stranded? MY ethics wouldn't ALLOW ME NOT TO DO SO! There's nothing ethical about being marginalized or ignored at all. In fact, it hurts. It really fucking hurts. All I know is I sure in hell wouldn't do that to you; I promise I wouldn't. I'd stop, in a heart-beat.

You know what else? If I thought it would matter, I would get down on my knees right now, crawl across the floor and kiss your lily-white feet. I wouldn't care if the floor were strewn with broken glass. I'd do anything for you, just to get you to talk to me. Anything. I know there must be someone outside of HERE that you talk to, and laugh with and love more than anybody else in the world. Tell me their name, and I'll change mine. If I could be anybody other than me in this world, I would be them, just so you'd talk back to me.

I feel like I tell you everything about my life, EVERYTHING! Yet, I'm afraid to ask you what your favourite colour is. I tried to ask before, but you never answered. What if it were *green*, for an example? Virginia if I knew that about you, I'd take a giant paintbrush and try to paint everything in my sight the colour green just so you wouldn't have to see any other colour. Speaking of colour, I'd change the colour of my own skin too, if I thought it would make a difference. But you act as if you can't even tell me

your favourite colour, and for that, I feel cheated, baby. Funny, maybe I'm just wired that way.

Do you like Sarah MacLaclan? I do. She sings a beautiful song called "Possession." Do you know it? Do you want me to sing it for you? *Listen as the wind blows.... from across the great divide, and I would be the one, to hold you down...* My voice used to be much better before I started smoking. What kind of tea is your favourite? I like Lapsang Souchong. It's a lovely tea. It really is. Baby, I'm not just some dumb ass that fell off the potato truck. I was born in the afternoon, but not yesterday afternoon. I'm crazy, but not stupid. There's a difference, baby. There really is. It's obvious that you can't be friends with EVERYBODY you see, but does that mean you can't be friends with ANY FUCKING BODY? I trusted you, Virginia, and I don't regret a single minute of it. I'd bring you flowers every single day if I thought I had an ice cube's chance in hell of you trusting me also. There are plenty of beautiful flowers that say all kinds of things. Roses are cliché. What could I say in a bouquet that would let you know that I think you're the most fantastic person on the planet? That is, next to my daughter, of course. I may be a low life scumbag who screws underaged girls, smokes pot and cuts on himself, but at least, I know what I feel, and I'm not afraid of it. Not anymore, and even if it is too late, it's still about love, Virginia. That's all. It doesn't matter where you find it. It's the fact that you find it all. I found something decent in you. I just love you as a human being, Virginia. I know my cutting is bigger than the both of us, sweetheart; I can't help it, and I mean I really can't. That doesn't mean I'm stupid. It just means I might be crazy. There's a difference.

That's why I'm not going to waste my time with

threats of suicide either. You know why? Because things have changed, and you can't even get a good shrink to talk you down from a ledge anymore. That's right. You'll sit there, just like you're doing now, and fill out some paperwork on me. I bet they even have little boxes you can check off now. Do they have one for "transference?" I guess that would be the most convenient label to use in my case, right? Label me, thereby negating me. That was Kierkegaard, baby. But hey, it's really easy when you can treat people as patients and not the other way around, isn't it?

The bottom line for me, Virginia, is at the end of the day, you're one of the finest human beings ever to grace this fucking shithole of a planet, and if you really ever wanted to know about me outside of HERE, I'd wait the required time for us to have a cup of Lapsang Souchong, together. I'd wait five years, no ten years; it wouldn't matter to me. Some people are just worth it. I only wish we weren't going in two different directions, that's all. You see, you're going home to a nice bed in the suburbs somewhere, and I am going on the lam from the police since I've broken the rules of my probation, but oh, what could have been, huh? It was beautiful sharing what we never had.

Well, when you see the Ampersands again, you can tell them that the reparative therapy didn't fucking work. I still like men. You can also tell Boyd I banged his daughter, and that now I'm going away to find mine. Oh, I was just thinking too, that if I ever do get the help I need, I just may write a book about my life and make you the main character. The only thing I would ask, though, is that you not flip to the ending without reading the beginning, first. That really fucks up a lot of the author's efforts when you skip over the beginning, it really does.

Well, I see you're getting up now, probably to call the police or something. Did you have anything to say to me before I left? This is our last Session after All. Who am I fucking kidding? *Deep Throat* will speak before you do. Anyway. I'll just see myself out.

Epilogue

“Here” *(Inextricable)*

I can no longer be like Holden Caulfield because I’m HERE. Not there with any of the rest of you miserable lot, but HERE. You might think it absurd that I can speak, given my condition, which is dead, but from HERE, I can see what’s going on. Now that I am HERE, there is also no need to be Saul Shields any more, either. If you want to call me anything at all, perhaps Mr. Omniscient would be best. Or maybe even Mr. ‘O’ for short. Regardless...

One would think that after twenty years, it just wouldn’t matter. The cops found Saul Shield’s body holding a diary and lying next to a puddle of his own blood mixed with his own saliva, semen and sweat. The diary entry contained a simple poem called “Gratitude” which read:

If the words in my heart
Are left unspoken,
They will forever remain unsaid.
And all you will hear
Is a screaming silence
As an echo haunts from the dead.
Yesterday's words are empty and hollow,
And not a single soul is promised tomorrow.
So before the sands of time
Can make a stone of your heart,
Please take my eternal GRATITUDE
Forever yours, from the start.
I love you and thanks for EVERYTHING.

Well, you might ask yourself, so fucking what? I would normally agree, except it meant something to somebody. And that was Virginia O'Callah. The police found the diary in the hotel room and handed it over to her twenty years ago. It was all behind her. She kept Saul's diary stashed away with all the other books she used in her practice.

After twenty fucking years, you tend to forget, because memories are designed to fade. No one gets in their

car and drives forward while looking in the rear view mirror. But you know, sometimes if the rear view mirror is cracked, it means that you didn't see everything you thought you did. Or maybe since it is cracked you're only seeing tiny fragments at a time. Regardless, Virginia didn't expect to meet...

"Hello," Virginia warmly greeted the visitor, "can I help you with something?"

"Hi, Miss O' Callah, my name is Raven. Raven Ampersand. I think you're the only one in the city who can give me some answers about my father...." Virginia's face turned to alabaster and her fifty-something year-old body stiffened like a statue.

"Your father?" she asked with a perplexed gaze, tinged with fear.

"Yes ma'am, Saul Shields."

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